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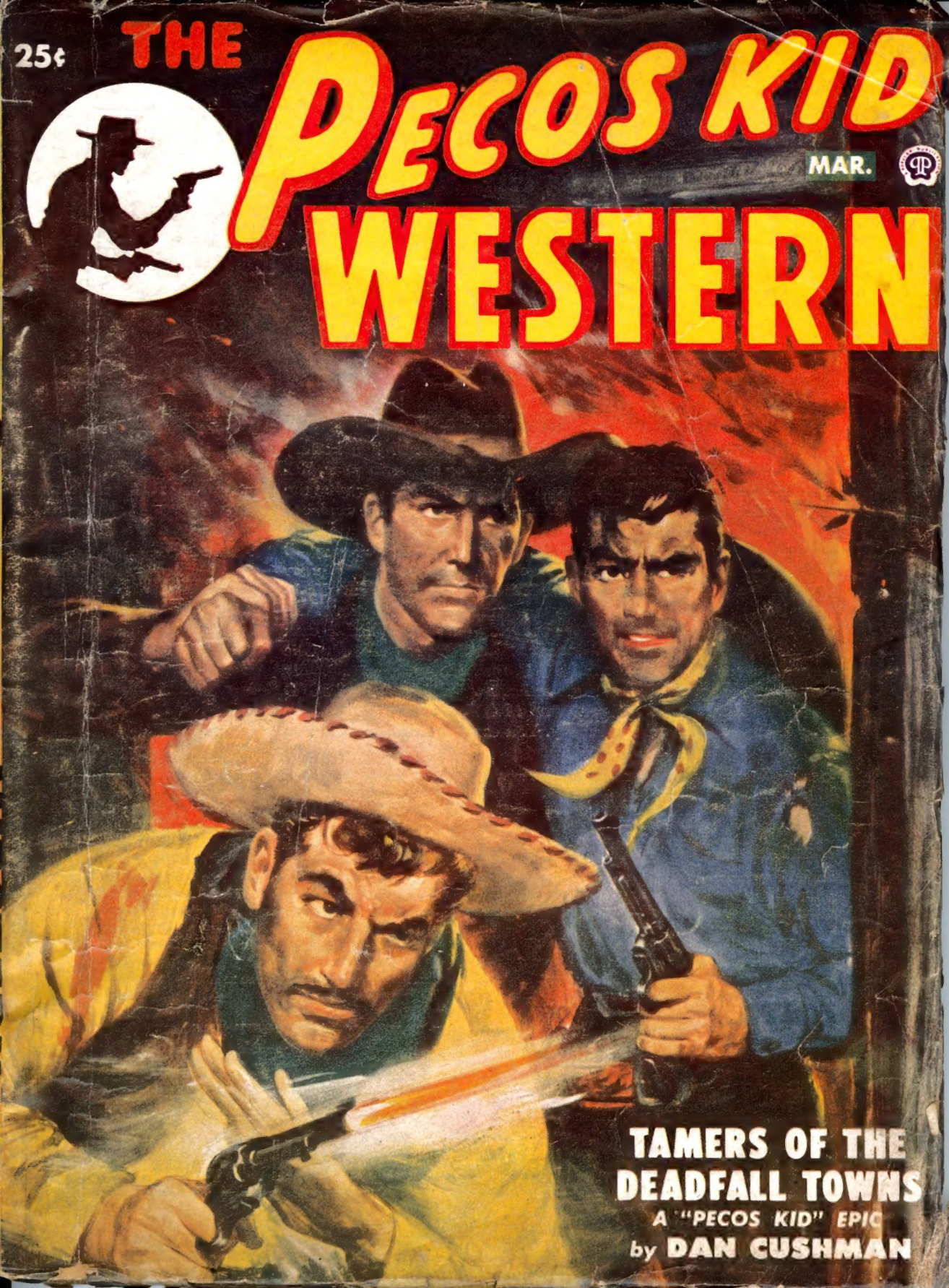
THE PECOS KID WESTERN

MAR.



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by DAN CUSHMAN

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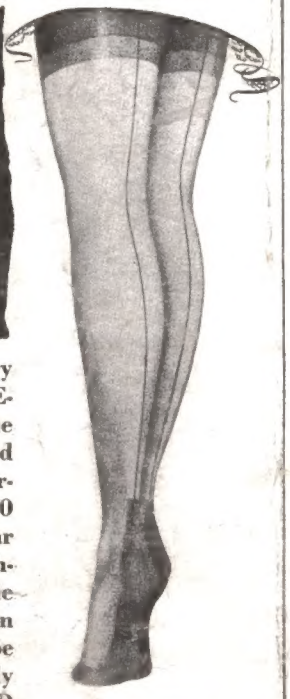

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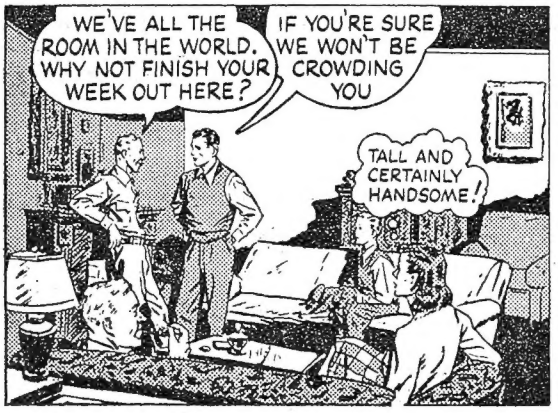
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THE PECOS KID WESTERN

Vol. 1 March, 1951 No. 4

SMASHING FULL-LENGTH PECOS KID NOVEL

TAMERS OF THE DEADFALL TOWNS—Dan Cushman 14

Butch Hernandez thought Bull Sink was a honkytonk heaven of uncorraled blondes; Jim Swing saw it as a muddy outpost where death stalked each dawn. To the Pecos Kid it was a town run by and for rustlers and murderers, who were stewing up a feast of hot lead for the Three Pistol Prodigals.

DRAMA-PACKED FRONTIER NOVELETTE

DEAD MAN'S BRAND—Ray Nafziger 88

Under the bludgeonings of fate, Mary Thurlew would sell out neither her fierce pride nor her splendid courage. For she knew that the battle is lost only when you quit fighting.

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TWO HARD-HITTING ACTION SHORTS

THE FANGED BUCCANEER—Harold F. Cruickshank 71

Tarat, the cunning wolverine, would be wilderness devil indeed if he could escape that carefully laid, fool-proof death-trap.

LONGHORN DYNAMITE—Robert L. Trimnell 80

It was up to one little old flea-bitten hound to try to make a hand on that perilous cattle-drive.

THREE SPECIAL WESTERN FEATURES

COME AND GET IT!—The Editor 6

SPIRIT OF THE MANITOU—Alkali Ike 78

TEXAS BRANDS—Nell Murbarger 112

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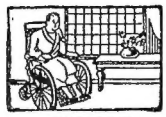
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By THE EDITOR

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During the bloody days of the Civil War, border ruffians infested south Missouri. Belonging neither to the Union or Confederate army, these bushwhackers preyed upon the stay-a-homes, murdering aged men or young soldiers home on furlough, and stealing provisions. Often they killed out of pure hatred.

Most notable of these renegades was Alf Bolin, head of a gang that prowled the hills and spread death and destruction wherever they paused. The wagon road that wound through the Ozarks from Springfield, Missouri, to Little Rock, Arkansas, was the scene of most of their depredations.

(Continued on page 8)

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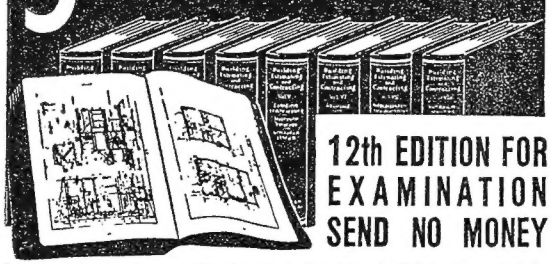

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(Continued from page 6)

Near the Arkansas line were some high, rocky bluffs known as "Murder Rocks," and from this Midwestern Robbers Roost the bad boy of Christian County and his gang would sit saddle like jackals, their eagle eyes sweeping the wagon road below. Then a freighter would heave into view and the renegades would swoop down on him, confiscate his cargo and leave him dead by the road.

Sometimes it would be a small group of Federals that fell victim to his cruel band, since Alf had strong Southern sympathies, in which case the gang would hit out for Arkansas. With a score or more murders chalked up to the young desperado and his cut-throats, the Union Army laid plans to capture him, but all efforts failed.

Then a reward was offered for his head, said to amount to five thousand dollars. That brought action, and among the many who tried for it was a lovesick young Iowa soldier who was anxious to see his girl again. He approached his superior.

"A furlough?" the officer snorted. "Hell, man, you bring us Alf Bolin's head and we'll give you an honorable discharge."

From Springfield, where the Federals were garrisoned, the young trooper set out on his perilous journey like a knight of old. He posed as a Southern sympathizer, and at each stopping place in the wilderness he learned something new about the bushwhacker's comings and goings. Bolin had the habit of stopping at a certain Taney County farmhouse for a snack, and to this home deep in the pine-studded hills near the Arkansas border the young soldier made his way.

The family was afraid of the bushwhack chieftain and the trooper found a young woman member sympathetic. Together they plotted Bolin's doom, and a few days later the border ruffian stopped at the home for breakfast. He scowled at the visitor

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

who was calmly sopping his plate with a biscuit.

"Who in hell's that?" he asked.

An escapee from the Union stockade at Springfield, the girl informed him. "He's on his way to his post in Arkansas."

"O. K.," he growled, tossing his hat into a corner. "Rustle me some grub."

Still eyeing the other suspiciously he began his meal of ham and eggs, but relaxed his vigilance as the visitor continued to ignore him. Meanwhile the young woman had risen to stir the fire with a heavy poker, which she set down near the soldier's hand.

Wiping his mouth with a sigh of contentment that worthy arose casually, but quickly seized the poker and brought it down on Bolin's head, then dragged him out into the yard. He called for an axe, and before the girl's startled gaze, chopped Bolin's head off like that of a Thanksgiving turkey. But it was a day of thanksgiving for the family, who gladly provided a sack in which to place the grisly head.

Bidding farewell to the relieved farmers the soldier headed for the nearest Federal camp at Ozark, where he was received joyfully. Soldiers placed the bushwhack leader's head on top of a pole beside a creek near the town, and the soldier, setting off on his furlough at last, paused long enough to give it a final salute.

Toward the close of the war two other bushwhack leaders teamed up in Arkansas and headed for Stone county, Missouri, with their combined crews. A strong home guard unit had been organized in the border county to combat cattle rustlers, and it was the aged father of one of the home guard leaders who was the object of their hatred this time. After hanging him, they pillaged the James river valley.

But news traveled fast even in those days, and the home guard was mobilized in

(Continued on page 12)

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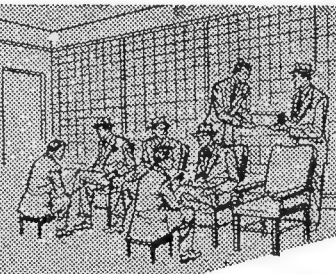

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(Continued from page 10)

short order. The raiders, well pleased with their foray, headed back "south of the border," unaware of pursuit, and driving their stolen cattle before them. Near Reed's Spring the enraged Stone County delegation overtook them and a running fight ensued. The bushwhackers continued on their way and camped that night beside a pond near the old Wilderness Road. There they settled for the night, satisfied that they were safe from pursuit.

But the Missourians weren't so easily discouraged. They pitched camp a few miles from the ridge highway, and attacked at dawn. They killed seven bushwhackers, and the others fled, leaving their cattle behind. In another series of running fights several more raiders were accounted for before the rest staggered across the Arkansas line. The pond beside which the seven border ruffians were left for the buzzards to pick was afterwards known as Ghost Pond and was given a wide berth by the superstitious hill men for many years afterward.

End of hostilities, however, saw no immediate end to the bushwhack threat, and once more the homesteaders had to organize for self-preservation. Hearing that a former guerilla leader had returned to his old home, a group went to his cabin one night, dragged him out and took him to a hilltop opening called the Devil's Den, where they hurled him down into two hundred feet of blackness. After which the Ozarks enjoyed a few years of peace and quiet.

We'll be greeting you in the next issue with more adventures of a certain Major Warren, late C. S. A., and his two saddlemates, Butch Hernandez and Jim Swing. Until then, amigos, *salud, amor y pesetos,* as our South-of-the-Border friends say, and be sure to look us up at your newsstand March 21st.

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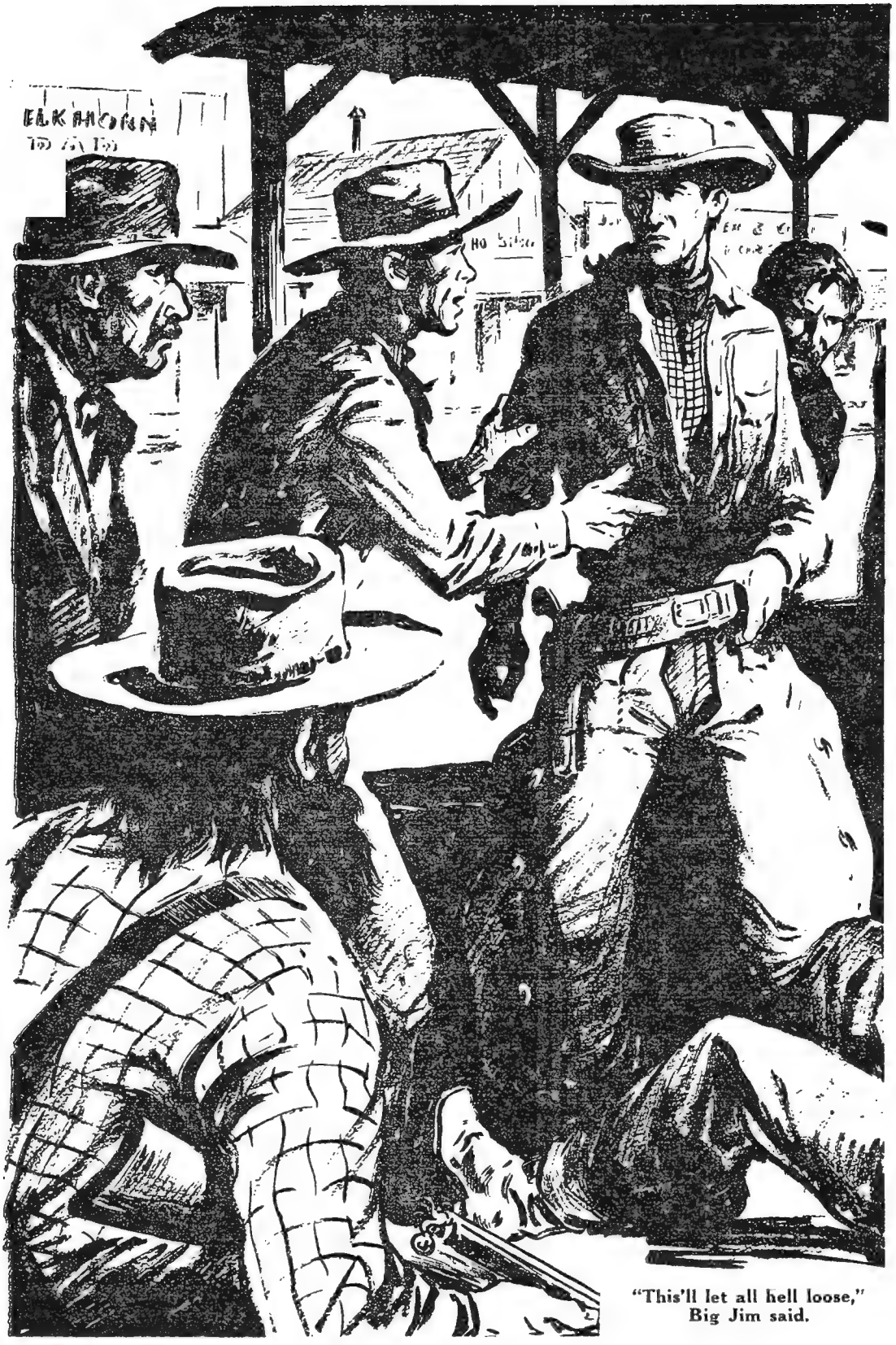

"This'll let all hell loose," Big Jim said.

Tamers of the Deadfall Towns

A Full-Length Pecos Kid Novel

By DAN CUSHMAN

Butch Hernandez, the romantic, saw Bull Sink as a honkytonk heaven of uncorraled blondes, drinks on the house, and gamblers' gold. Sober Jim Swing saw it as a muddy outpost where Death stalked the boardwalk each dawn. And to the Pecos Kid, it was a rough-tough town, run by and for rustlers and murderers, who were already stewing up a feast of hot lead with cold-grave sauce for the Three Pistol Prodigals.

CHAPTER ONE

Interrupted Journey

THEY CAME on tired horses down the freight road. In the lead was William Calhoun Warren, the Pecos Kid, his lean body resigned to the saddle, his eyes almost closed against the bright, Montana sun; next was Hernandez Flanagan, dark and handsome, plucking a guitar as he rode, singing over and over the same lines of a Mexican border song; and in the rear, apparently asleep, was Jim Swing, a huge young man with blunt features and burlap colored hair.

They'd left Frenchman's Shanties in Charlo coulee at dawn. Since then they'd seen no human habitation, only the bare browned prairie, and the twin lines of the freight road.

At last they topped a low ridge and looked down on the Big Dry Crossing of the Missouri.

Fifty or sixty freight wagons were in sight, unhitched, with mules and horses grazing across the bottoms. Some of the teamsters had pitched tents, or constructed wickiups, and along the brush were some tepees. The river, bank full from melting snows in the Rockies, followed a straight course between cutbank shores. There was no sign of the ferry.

Pecos drew up, took off his hat, and fingered his brick-colored hair. He licked the taste of salty alkali off his lips and spat before turning to speak to Hernandez Flanagan who still plucked the guitar.

"There it is, Butch. You better hide that Spik fiddle or one of those teamsters will shoot it to splinters and you'll be making a new one out of cigar boxes like you did at Casa Miguel."

Hernandez grinned with a flash of white teeth against moccasin-brown skin. "They would dare? In all the history of my Chihuahua homeland there was never a man who won so many duels, who was beloved by so many women, and who was so far in debt as your Hernandez. Thus, if one of those miserable hide-wollopers so much as point hees finger at my guitar I will shoot it off and wear it on my watch chain."

Pecos, still watching the camp, drawled in his easy, Texas manner, "You haven't got a watch chain. You gambled it off in Miles."

"What good was the chain after I had given my watch to that señorita in Deadwood?"

"She stole it from you."

Big Jim awoke and said in a voice that was unexpectedly treble, "Gosh, Butch, I should think you'd save your money and see if you could pay back some of your debts."

"Lend me your tobacco and stop hounding me. Why should you be worrying about those few miserable thousand dollars I am owing you? Have I not said that the debts of Hernandez Pedro Gonzales y Fuente Jesus Maria Flanagan are sacred, and he will go on owing them every last centavo forever and ever?"

THEY rode on, down a long slope, through little badlands hills, and came out with the camp only a couple hundred yards away.

The Indians were howling drunk, beating tom-toms. There was never a shortage

of liquor at the Big Dry. It was a favorite route among whiskey traders who wanted to avoid army inspection at Fort Missouri or the Musselshell.

Rough, whiskered men, armed and suspicious, lounged around the wagons, watching their approach. They could get five years in federal prison for dealing in Injun whiskey, and any man might be a government spy.

Pecos finally recognized one of them and called, "Hello, McLouse!"

His real name was McLauch," but he'd been called McLouse for so many years he'd almost forgotten. He was a stooped, powerful, filthy man with fierce red whiskers and a huge cheekful of tobacco.

"Well, I'm damned if it ain't the fast gun from Texas. You still shooting the corks off from bottles at a hundred apiece?"

He was referring to the day two years ago when Pecos had won four hundred in a shooting contest with Captain Steele, a circus marksman, down in Laramie.

Pecos made some remark about two-bit exhibition gunmen, got down with saddle stiffness crippling his legs, and asked, "What you got here, a renegade's convention?"

"Ferry cable broke. This is a hell of a place. Kid, you won't believe it, but the grub run out five days ago and nobody's even noticed."

"Those Indians haven't."

"Gros Ventre." He held the tribe in contempt. "Listen to 'em howl. Everybody drunk. Squaws and all. But they'll sober up directly. They're down to trading off their breech clouts."

Pecos let the bridle drag and walked on to a place of canvas and cribbed logs that proved to be a saloon.

A TALL man with a braying voice and a prominent Adam's apple was riding herd on the jug, arguing politics with his csutomers, siding with the U.P. in the Credit Mobilier scandal.

He stopped suddenly in the middle of a sentence when he saw Pecos with Hernandez and Big Jim behind him. "Say, you're the Pecos Kid!" he said, elbowing around the bar.

Pecos hid his surprise and said, "Why yes, seh."

"I'm Missou. That's enough for me if the Pecos Kid's enough name for you." He winked and dug down in his pocket. Then he changed his mind and looked back inside the tent at the men who were watching them. He said from the side of his mouth, "You come along. Got something for you. Been waiting to give it to you for three days."

Pecos laughed and said, "Why, I'd call that nothing short of remarkable, seeing we didn't even know we were comin' here until sunup this mawnin'."

"You're here, aren't you?" Missou had hold of his shirt sleeve, pulling him along.

"Seh, take your hands off me."

"All right. Don't get ringy. You come yonder."

He vaulted inside a covered wagon, and Pecos, stiff and tired, followed him.

A breathless heat lay beneath the wagon sheets. He waited as Missou drew from his pocket a letter bent and dirty from long carrying.

Pecos opened it. Two lines were scrawled with the blunt point of a bullet:

> See Jawn Ridley at Citadel Rock. Come at night. M.C.

He read it, let a laugh jerk his shoulder, wadded the paper and thrust it in his levis.

"Just like that! *See Jawn Ridley!* Now who gave this *M. C.* the idea he could tell me to see anybody?"

"That's Mike Coffey. He's foreman at Citadel Rock. He speaks for Jawn Ridley, all right, and when Jawn tells a man to come he *comes.*" Missou bent over in the middle from laughter. "Either that, or he moves to that renegade town at Bull Sink."

"The hell with him."

Missou opened his eyes wide and said, "If you want my advice—"

"I don't."

Pecos got down from the wagon. Big Jim and Hernandez were waiting. For just a moment he looked drawn and tired, older than his twenty-eight years.

Missou, still not able to believe that anyone would defy the command of Jawn Ridley, shouted after him. "Hey, you're going to Citadel, aren't you?"

"I said the hell with him. If Ridley wants to see me let him go north to Milk River."

IT WAS sundown. The Pecos Kid lay on his back with his hat over his eyes and an empty coffee cup on his chest.

Hernandez after a third reading of the letter said, "There is one thing to consider, and that is the matter of pesos, of which thees Jawn Ridley undoubtedly has plenty. Now—"

"To hell with him."

Hernandez cried, "And to hell weeth you! First in one breath you tell me to pay off my debts, and in the next you snap your fingers at thees Señor moneybags who owns half the cattle in Montana Territory. What is there about Milk River that you would go there?"

"I want to drown you in it." He sat up, putting aside his hat and coffee cup. There was a big fight in progress at the Gros Ventre camp, everyone screaming at once. Pecos listened without too much interest. He went on, "All right, I'll tell you. I served in the army during the wah. In the army, when your superior officer says *put your pants on backward and wade eight feet through green swamp,* you do it. So when I was mustered out and headed nawth—"

"But what has thees to do with pesos for the pockets of Hernandez?"

"I had my bellyful of being ordered around. Anyhow, I got word on a silver strike. Pal up yonder on the Sweetgrass. Apperson, sergeant, Tully's brigade. Maybe it'll be another Comstock."

In the morning, stripped, with clothes bundled on their saddles, they crossed the river, swimming, holding to the horses' tails. They followed the freight road north, spending the night at a squawman's shanty on the Little Bow, and mid-afternoon next day reached a town of cottonwood log shanties on a bench overlooking Milk River—the new northern terminus of the Texas cattle herds.

It had rained the night before turning the single, winding street into a quagmire. Half a hundred men were gathered near a freight outfit which had just made the long drag from Benton by way of the Bear Paws. All the talk concerned tobacco, of which, apparently, there was a shortage.

They tied up at a hitchrack, waded to their bootheels, and stamped sticky gumbo mud on the corduroy sidewalk

Men drifted back from the freight wagon, still talking about tobacco. It was a rough town, with citizens to match—Indian traders in buckskins and moccasins, prospectors, trappers, and cowboys who for reasons of their own had chosen to ride farther than their companions, and pause within a night's travel of the Canadian border.

Across the street stood a long, log freight house, but aside from that the town was just a double line of keg and tincup saloons.

PECOS inquired all along the street before finding anyone who'd ever heard of Apperson. His mine, in the Sweet Grass country, proved to be a hundred miles west.

"Hell, that's nothing in this country." But the Pecos Kid looked discouraged. He needed a drink. One round of raw trade liquor took the last three dollars from his pocket. At the trading post they learned that foodstuffs sold for a dollar a pound regardless of kind.

It was evening then, and he led them inside a dim, greasy little restaurant.

"How much you got?" he asked Big Jim.

Jim cried defensively, "I scratched and saved and got ninety-five dollars sewed up inside where I ain't telling, and I'm not letting it go. Damn it, I'm sick of being drug from one range to the other, a flat, busted saddle tramp."

He was still talking when a lanky old man in a flour sack apron came down behind the counter, served three cups of coffee, and said, "Beef steak, risin' bread, beans, rice, and dried applie pie. Five dollars buys you a ticket around the horn."

Pecos said, "We'll go around the horn. Jim, get that money unpinned from your drawers. You wouldn't let your friends starve for a sneakin' little fifteen dollars."

A man had come inside. He stopped with his back to the door cutting off the evening light. Feeling his gaze, Pecos looked around. The man was large, angular and powerful, about forty. Pecos had never seen him before. He was certain of that. He had the sort of face you'd remember.

"Pecos?" the man asked.

"Well, I'm damned. This is getting a bit ridiculous. Every place I stop. Yes, seh, I'm called Pecos."

The man smiled with a tightening of his lips and walked on, coming down hard in his mud-smeared riding boots. He still smelled of fresh horse, so he'd just dismounted after long riding.

There were some coins in his big, red-freckled hand. Gold coins. "Fifteen?" He tossed out a ten and a five, and he still had a heavy weight of gold to rattle. It was a friendly sound, and with bright, smiling eyes Hernandez arose, swept off his hat and bowed low.

"Señor, would you do us the honor of coming to live with us?"

Pecos said, "Sit down." Then to the stranger, "Thanks, but we got money."

"Of course. This is just *Northern* hospitality."

"What are you—the Milk River welcoming committee?"

"No, the other way around. I came to *get* you. You caused me one hell of a chase. All the way from Big Dry."

"You're Mike Coffey. You're the man who left the letter."

He nodded.

"Sorry, Coffey, but we just got here. We're not leaving town."

The Pecos Kid said, "Sorry, we're not leaving town."

"I'd guess that you *were*."

Anger showed in the sudden narrowing of the Pecos Kid's eyes. He swung away from the counter. The movement seemed slack and casual, but it freed his holstered .45. Coffey kept smiling. His intensely blue eyes showed amusement.

"Did I say you gave *me* one hell of a chase? I should have said *us*. I'm not alone." He tilted his head toward the rear of the dim eating place. Several men had moved quietly through the kitchen. A half-breed with short, ribbon-bound braids, stood ahead of the others with a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm. There were other men out front. Pecos sensed their presence without looking around.

"Euchred," he said, with the old, easy drag in his voice. "Yes, seh, you pulled the pack on me. I guess I should be flat-

tered, only you got me overrated. One gun would be sufficient."

"I got nothing against you, Pecos. It's just that Jawn Ridley said *come*, and you didn't."

"They always come when Ridley says that?"

"Most always." He plucked the Colts, first from Pecos' holster, then Big Jim's, and Hernandez's. "Now go ahead and enjoy your supper. We'll wait out back. You hear that?—*out back*. I'd rather nobody saw us leaving town together."

"Is it too much to ~~ask~~ what in the devil Ridley wants? Why all this back door, dark of the moon—"

"That's something I dare say you'll find out a couple of nights from now when you talk to Jawn Ridley face to face."

CHAPTER TWO

Big Jawn Ridley

THEY RODE for many miles with only small talk passing among them, camping about midnight at an abandoned trapper's shanty in a nameless coulee.

"I'll take that gun back now," Pecos said to big Mike Coffey.

"No. You boys had a hard trip through a bad country. You need some rest and relaxation. We'll do any shooting that needs being done, and you do the sleeping."

Pecos laughed and said, "Thank you, seh."

At dawn they were in the saddle again, riding across high prairie, southwestward. Morning passed, and afternoon. Ahead lay the Missouri River badlands, sharply revealed in the yellow highlight and purple shadow of a late sun. Here and there they had a glimpse of the river, with the summits of Medicine Ridge rising beyond.

Coffey, riding beside Pecos, pointed with an outflung arm and said, "Yonder's the Citadel. 'Way across. That first terrace of the ridge, just short of the steep rocks. You can see the white shine the big house makes. I guess it's about all of twenty miles off."

"He calls it that—the Citadel?"

"It's a good name."

They stopped at a horse camp of the Stinchfield Cattle Company where without question a cowboy cut out fresh mounts for them. The trail now took them off the prairie rim, down long coulees, across cottonwood flats just above the river. There was a freight road, and shortly after sundown, a landing with a flatboat ferry where a small, weatherbeaten man sat hunched over a book. He didn't glance up even when the horses clomped almost atop him, and rocked the boat so its forward end dipped water.

Coffey said, "Hello, Goodeye. You still reading that same book?"

He looked up then, and Pecos could see his right eye was a blind milky white.

The ferry creaked and strained against its wire cable as the power of the spring current propelled it across. It came to rest on a rather substantial log and plank steamboat dock with a counter-balanced landing stage to get the horses ashore without swimming. On a bench above high water stood a couple of cabins, and a warehouse bearing on its staff the emblem of the St. Louis and Montana Trading Company. It was still a five minute ride through cottonwoods before the rest of the little settlement came into sight.

"Medicine Landing?"

"*Ridley* Landing," Coffey said.

He laughed. "Why, the country's sure enough changing. It used to belong to just the Injuns and God. Now I guess it's even out of the hands of God."

THE LANDING was very old, having been established in 1844 for the Gros Ventre trade. Later it found itself on the north-south freight road, and now that the freight outfits favored the western route by way of Benton and the Sweet Grass, it had become little more than a private landing

for the big Ridley and Stinchfield cattle outfits.

The buildings, all ten of them, were of bleached cottonwood logs, all of one story, and apparently all except a couple were saloons. Lamps burned here and there, making splashes of yellow in the late twilight. From one of them came the plink-plink of a piano, and on the air was an odor of the empty beer barrels that had been stacked outside.

The Landing was left behind. The freight road led up a stream called the Big Muddy. Rising to the east in a series of pine studded ridges was the hill and mountain country called Medicine Ridge.

"*Ridley* Ridge?" Pecos asked.

"Medicine," Coffey said.

The freight road, after wandering the bottoms, forked with one branch pointing westward toward Fort Wells on the Musselshell, while the other climbed Medicine Ridge by a series of rocky pitches.

They turned eastward, dropped over the first high summit and there found Ridley's home ranch spread beneath them.

Even in a country of big outfits it was something to see. There were many acres of sheds and pole corrals, tree shaded, with a mountain stream here and there making a flash in the night light as it meandered through them. Sheds and bunkhouses, built along a wagon road, gave the appearance of a small town. The foreman's house of white-painted logs stood on a low bench up from the creek.

The big ranch house, as though it were indeed a citadel, sat with a removed magnificence a quarter-mile up the valley on a perfectly flat terrace, fronted and backed by steep banks of dirt and stone. It was a three-story structure of sawed lumber, white painted, with a porch that doubled its apparent size. There were bigger houses in the Territory, perhaps, but a man would travel to Last Chance before

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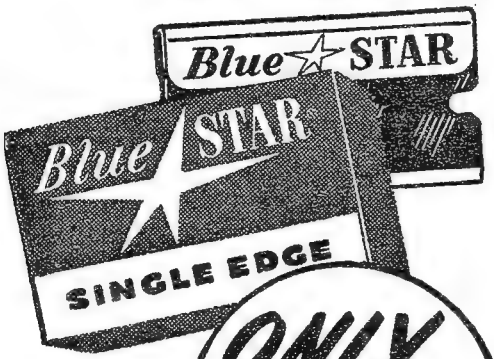

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AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N.Y.

seeing them. It was awe inspiring indeed.

Coffey said, "Don't say too much. I wouldn't want the men to know who I'm bringing"

He didn't explain. Riding ahead, he took them on a roundabout trail along the hillside, until he was able to cut straight down to the steep bank which fronted the grounds. A man on watch revealed himself with movement and a bit of gunshine. He talked with Coffey, dropped again out of sight, then Coffey returned and they sat for a few minutes, waiting. At the big house a screen door opened, slapped shut. A man, straight and powerful in silhouette, stood with lamplight behind him.

"All right," Coffey said, "You can go up there now."

"That the great man himself?" Pecos turned as he rode off, "Sure you can trust me? I might just make a break for the up country."

"That'd mean we'd have to go get you all over again."

PECOS found a bridle path and followed it in a big figure S through the trees and shrubbery of the grounds. It gave him a chance to see Ridley long before Ridley could see him.

The man was probably in his early forties, though he looked younger. His face was narrow, with prominent bones. It was a strong face with a good jaw. His hair, dark brown and very curly, was cut in a long feather-edge. He wore a mustache so closely cropped it was hard to see in the backlighting from the door. He watched Pecos ride to a stop and dismount with an appraising, slightly amused expression.

"Major Warren!" he said, "Good of you to come!"

"I came with a gun in my back as you well know, seh. And I guess you can forget about the *Major* part of it. All that's a long way behind."

There was no smile on Ridley's face now, and his spine was stiff as a rifle barrel. "I'll never forget the butchery of the South and neither will you!"

"Sorry, seh." He dismounted and walked the last twenty steps. "No offense to you or the South, but I meant it about leaving the wah behind. I headed into a new country to start over again, just like you did. Only I guess I haven't accumulated so much."

Ridley was smiling again. "Only the notches on your gun?"

"I don't carve notches. And now, if you'll tell me why you sent your gunmen to hunt me down and drag me here—"

"Sorry, Major."

"Just *the Pecos Kid,* remember?"

"Sorry, Pecos." He came down from the step to shake hands with him. His manner showed it was quite a concession. It was a concession Ridley would not have made to the governor of the territory, nor to the president of the republic, but he made it to Pecos, who, like himself, had once been an officer in the Confederate army. He stood, slightly taller and much broader, one hand on his shoulder, and gestured outward at the vast home ranch spread on the creek bottoms below.

"Sometimes things look more substantial than they are. It's not easy for a *rebel* officer to get ahead and hold his gains in a country where all the cards are stacked by the Yankees. That's why I brought you here. I heard what you did down in Mascalero, and in Corbus City before that. So, when a stage driver said you were headed toward Big Dry crossing from Miles, I sent them to bring you."

With Ridley's heavy hand still on his shoulder they went inside.

HE COULD smell perfume, and a piano was playing. It gave him the strange feeling of suddenly walking into another world. He stopped at the edge of a big, dim, luxuriously furnished room. A girl stood with her back to a square piano look-

ing at him intently but without emotion.

He'd never seen her before, yet her face hit him with a shock like recognition.

She stood very straight with her shoulders back and her head up. She was dressed in a riding skirt, a blouse, and tiny, square-toed boots. Her hair was windblown and fell in careless masses across her shoulders. Her riding skirt was wrinkled the shape of her body. Her eyes were wide set, her nose small, her mouth rather broad. Taken by themselves none of her features were good, but put together they gave her a striking beauty, a beauty with fire and color in it.

Someone was still caressing the keys of the piano. Jawn Ridley snapped, "Albert!" and a young man came instantly to his feet.

He was twenty or twenty-one, and tall as Ridley, but still he gave the impression of being immature and weak.

Ridley introduced them. The girl was Letty Stinchfield and the boy was his son. The girl didn't say a word, but the boy, ill at ease, mumbled a greeting. Ridley waited and with a movement of impatience broke in:

"Holy hell, is that one of the things you learned in St. Louis? This isn't the opera. You shake hands with a man in this country." Then without giving him a chance to do it he said, "Take Letty and go outside."

"Cigar?" he asked, but saw Pecos was rolling a cigarette. He bit off the end of a long, slim panetella, and strode after his son. "Albert—remember this—no one is to know the major or his two companions are here."

When he came back Pecos said, "Now what's the meaning of all that? What difference if the whole world knows I visited you here at the Citadel?"

"Because you're going to work for me, and it might easily jeopardize your life." Motioning for Pecos to follow, he walked with a stiff stride across the room leaving the odor of fine Havana smoke behind him. He entered an office, pulled down the shades and closed the door. Then, seated behind a massive mahogany desk, he studied Pecos' face. "An adventurer! You're a fool. You could light someplace, make a fortune. This whole new country, like a horn of plenty, opened for the taking."

Pecos sat slouched in a chair and laughed. "Some of us were just born to be saddle tramps."

"Not a man who was under Johnston!"

When Jawn Ridley said come, they came.

"Oh, hell! Let's hear no more of that. My commission came pretty late. I reckon it came because all the real majors got killed."

"Well, what *are* you interested in?"

The question should have been an easy one, but it made the Pecos Kid stop and think. Finally he said, "We were in Milk River looking for Jim Apperson. He's got a silver mine on Sweet Grass."

Ridley put down his cigar so hard it knocked the ash off. There was a quick, impatient power in every move he made.

He said, "I own eleven gold and silver prospects back here in Medicine Ridge. I bought them and closed them down to prevent miners setting fire to my range. They're not worth operating, but for all that I wouldn't trade them for the best mine in Sweet Grass." As he talked he unlocked a desk drawer. He took out a leather bag, weighted by metal, tossed it over. It landed with a heavy jingle.

"Is that for me, seh?"

Ridley jerked his head *yes*. "I play for big stakes. You'll find that the men who work for me also play for big stakes."

Pecos pulled the drawstring, looked inside. The yellow glow of golden double eagles had a certain phosphorescence.

"Must be a thousand dollars here."

"You're a good guesser. There's exactly a thousand dollars."

"And what do we do for it?"

"You've already *done* for it. That's your pay for coming down from Milk River."

Pecos tossed the bag from one hand to the other. It was heavy—heavier than bullet lead, almost four pounds in a cluster of gold pieces smaller than his fist.

"Seh, this is very nice stuff, and in the past I've had considerable trouble resisting it. By the way, I think I *will* have one of those Havanas."

CHAPTER THREE

Letty Stinchfield

TWO HOURS had passed, and the Pecos Kid stood outside alone, under a flawless night sky. A cool wind flowed up from the south, carrying the odor of sage and poplar, of spring growth and the river.

He stood for a while at the edge of the porch. Someone moved and he turned, thinking of the girl, Letty Stinchfield.

It was a man lounged at ease against a pillar. He could tell nothing about him, except that he was slim, and armed with two guns. Moonlight raised points of metallic shine from some silver conchos on his belt, from the crossed rows of cartridges, and from the guns that rode low on his thighs. Very low. Too low for a riding man. Ridley's bodyguard.

He must have known that Pecos saw him, but no word was spoken. Pecos went on down the steps and across the grounds, among dressed-down specimen shrubs, along some white crushed rock that had been laid between brick forms to make a carriage path.

Below, about a quarter-mile away, he could see lights in the foreman's house. He'd find Hernandez and Jim there, but he was in no hurry. In the cool shadow of the grounds he took time to think about Big Jawn Ridley.

Ridley was right. It was hell for a man who'd been an officer on the Southern side when he went up against Northern law. Yonder, to the south, lay Horn Creek, the Big and Little Sage, and Bull Creek, forming, together with Medicine Ridge, the heart of his cattle empire. And now, with the help of the G.A.R. in Helena, homesteaders were grabbing the best of it, fencing the springs, ploughing under the deep buffalo grass that grew in the bottoms.

On hearing Ridley that far, the Pecos Kid had said, "You're not getting me to run any hoeman off your grass. The grass was free for you, it's free to them."

"My cattle and horses aren't free!"

And Ridley had gone on with his story, claiming that even with G.A.R. financial help, no rancher could make a living along those badland streams without winter range in the Medicine Ridge. They weren't sodbusters. They were rustlers, living safe in the protection of the G.A.R., making a gesture at oat fields and spuds, but actually supplying rustled stock to the outlaw town of Bull Sink.

Pecos said, "I don't guess the G.A.R. would object too much if you rode down yonder with forty-fifty men and shot out a rustler town. With that gone—"

"We tried that, three times. They were warned each time. Yes, I know what you're thinking—that they have men planted right here at my home ranch. That's why I kept your arrival as quiet as possible."

Ridley, with his violent manner, had come to a stop with his hands spread wide on the table. "That's why I need *you*. You have a reputation. Some people think you have a bad reputation. They'll accept you down in Bull Sink. Jack Kansas, Legless Joe Hames and all the rest. This so-called Horn Creek Land Owners' Association will accept you, too. I want you to go down there and take up a homestead."

"Me?"

"Yes. From now on you're a Union veteran. Here's the papers to prove it."

"Well I'm damned. You think of everything."

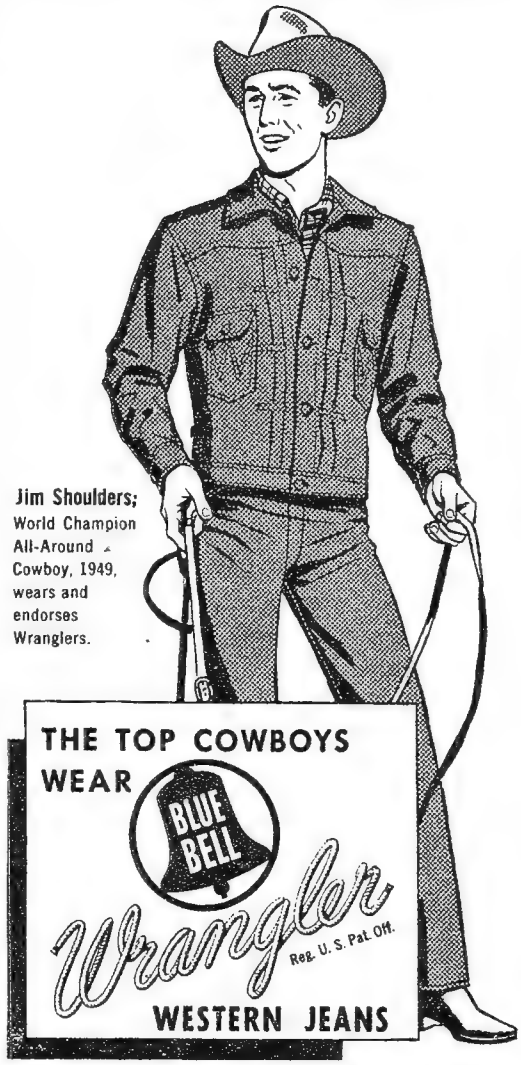
THAT'S how it had been. He'd agreed to take up the land, to do a business in rustled cows, and gather the information that would permit them to clean out the rustler's town of Bull Sink.

A sound from the shadow made him spin around, his hand by habit on his hip where the gun should have been. It gave him a peculiar, lost feeling to be without that three pounds of metal that had stood beside him through all the miles and years that separated him from the Pecos.

He first thought of the gunman lounged in the shadow of Ridley's porch. Then a perfume touched his nostrils. Very faint, but it hit him with a jolt of recognition.

It was the girl. She was a shadow, moving through a vinecovered arbor. Her riding skirt, her shirt, and her skin were all dark, as though turned the same hue by western sun, and he had a hard time seeing her even when she was so close he could hear the slide of her smooth skin beneath the blouse.

Albert Ridley wasn't with her. She was alone. She knew who he was looking for



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and laughed, "Albert? Why he's afraid of me."

He didn't ask *why*. He knew why. She was too much woman for him.

Pecos walked towards her. She'd stopped at the edge of the shadow to wait for him. Her arms were at her sides, her head was back. She was smiling with lips pressed tightly together. It could have been contempt or a challenge.

"You're one of the Stinchfields." He meant one of *the* Stinchfields of the big Stinchfield Cattle Company across the river.

She nodded and kept watching him. "I've heard of you, too. He introduced you as Major Warren. You're not *Major Warren*. You're the Pecos Kid. You're a gunman. I heard you were the fastest gunman who ever came north of Wyoming."

"They speeded me up a little."

"You're the man who killed Manuel Querno. You killed Star Glynn, you killed Sundance Billy."

"No, ma'am. You're thinking of somebody else; I didn't kill all those men." He laughed and added, "Why, look at me. I don't even carry a gun."

"He brought you here to kill more men, didn't he?"

"You're jumping to conclusions."

"He brought you here to kill Jack Kansas."

Kansas was the one-time train robber, now the rustler chief at Bull Sink. He kept watching her eyes, wondering why she'd followed him.

"I take it Kansas is no friend of the Stinchfields. Why should it make any difference whether I came to the country to kill him or not?"

There was challenge in the tilt of her head and in her voice, "Maybe it'd be the other way around."

"Maybe. But Kansas ain't here. He's yonder sixty-seventy miles in Bull Sink. What are we doing talking about Kansas?" Pecos said.

SHE MOVED back from him, and he followed deeper into the shadow. He had the strong impression that she wanted him to follow her. It was so dark he could see only the oval of her face.

She said, "When are the rest of them coming?"

"The rest of who?"

"The gunmen you're bringing in from Miles?"

I guess you'll have to see Ridley about that. I know nothing about gunmen from Miles."

"You're lying to me!"

"You're a beautiful woman. Beautiful women get lied to all the time, but not about things like that. I've come all the way nawth from Denver City without seeing a more beautiful woman than you."

She hitched one shoulder away and said, "Who was in Denver City?"

"You see, you're like all the rest. You can't endure hearing another woman is beautiful even at a thousand miles."

"What do I care who you took up with in Denver?"

It gave him an unsteady feeling being so close to her. It was as though he'd had ten drinks of Ridley's brandy instead of only one. She started to move away and he seized her by the arms, just below her shoulders. She twisted back and forth with a quick, feline strength, but he held her.

She spat, "I'll call for help, and they'll kill you!"

"Who? Albert Ridley?"

"No!"

"That was a love song he was playing on the piano. You been around Albert too long. I don't play my love songs on the piano."

"Let me go!"

She didn't want him to let her go.

He said, "You shouldn't have followed me."

"I didn't follow you."

"You're here."

"I didn't want you to get killed."

"At Bull Sink?"

"He *is* sending you over there, then!" She waited for him to answer, but his mind was a long way from Bull Sink. She said, "Why did you come here after dark, hill trail, on the quiet? Why are your friends down there in Mike Coffey's house with newspapers pinned over the windows? Why'd he introduce you as *Major* Warren? You're just a hired gunman! Usually

Letty Stinchfield—pretty but deadly.

he wouldn't allow a hired gunman inside the house."

"You still worrying about whether I'll get killed?"

Now she really tried to get away. "No! I don't care what happens to you. Quit it, you're hurting my arm!"

SHE bent over, twisting half way around, and slipped out of his grasp. She backed into the arbor. Vines had grown up the sides, but there was a rift across the roof where the moon shone through.

"Stop!" she whispered.

He did. The moon reflected cold blue from the double derringer in her hand.

He laughed and managed to make it sound natural. "What's all this talk about you calling for help? You're one woman that don't need to call for help."

She spoke behind her little, white teeth. "What did he say when you were inside the office?"

"I forgot. I think he said you were the most beautiful woman this side of Denver. And I told him he was wrong I told him there was nobody in Denver that could even compare with you."

As he talked his eyes roved the arbor. A hammock had been stretched at one side. There was a seat heaped with sofa pillows along the other. His hands, hanging at his sides, were just above the bench. With a natural swing of his right hand he took one of the pillows, lifted it, and before she realized what had happened it was in front of the derringer.

She tried to get the gun free, but he followed, the pillow at arm's length, pressed against the muzzle.

He said, "There's nothing like a pillow to stop bullet lead. Why, this pillow would slow up a .45. That little cap and ball wouldn't stand a chance."

She said something through her teeth. She twisted and bent over. It was like a fencing contest. The gun exploded. He felt the shock of it, and it almost tore the pillow from his fingers. The bullet plowed through and struck him without piercing his clothes He struck her wrist a chopping blow, and knocked the gun to the ground, its second barrel still unexploded.

She dived for it, but he was ahead of her.

"A .44," he said, "Why, that's an important caliber."

He pulled the cap out and tossed the gun aside. There was nothing to stop her getting away, but she didn't.

He seized her by the arms again. He drew her hard against him. She didn't resist. She neither clung to him nor fought

him. She was perfectly pliable in his arms. He had the feeling that she'd have fallen if he had not been there to support her. He kissed her. Her lips made no response. They were slightly open. Her eyes were open, staring at him.

A man was running along one of the gravel paths. It was Albert Ridley. He stopped about twelve strides away. The breeze carried an odor of gunsmoke, and he couldn't help locating it. They were revealed by moonlight coming through the rift in the vines. He turned away, pretending not to see them.

"Al, where are you, Al?" a man called in a nasal voice. He came at a wobbly half-run, having trouble with his riding boots. Conchos gleamed on his belt, the butts of silver mounted revolvers gleamed against his thighs. It was that gunman who'd been posted on the porch. He stopped and said, "Oh, there you are. What was that shot?"

"I guess it was down at the bunkhouse," Al replied.

* * *

They walked back together. The girl took a deep breath and moved suddenly pulling herself away.

"I have to go!"

He didn't try to stop her. She remembered the gun, snatched it up, tucked it inside the waist of her riding skirt. Then she was gone, and for a long time he stood looking into the darkness that had swallowed her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bull Sink

THEIR homestead was on Horn Creek twenty-eight miles east of Medicine Ridge, a relinquishment purchased from a father and two sons who'd left the year before to do horse and scraper work for the Northern Pacific. The only buildings were a shack of cottonwood logs and a horse shed. A rail fence still circled the garden spot, bright green from volunteer spuds. Another fence which had been built around a spring had been pushed down, and when they rode up half a dozen steers wearing the Ridley brand were inside, bedded down on the cool, damp earth.

They put the shack in order and immediately went to work on some of Ridley's cattle, using a running iron to alter his Rocking R to a Circle B. On the third day of this, Pecos, who was standing lookout on some cutbank rims, signaled down to the branding fire that visitors were coming.

There were three men—the Rutledge brothers from the upper reaches of the Big Sage, and ragged old Gus Hyslop from a few miles down on Horn Creek.

Harry Rutledge, a tall, bent-over man of thirty-five, jogged up bareback on a muly bronc. His legs dangled so far his toes almost touched the ground. He wore bib overalls that looked too big for him because of the gun cinched around the waist. After introducing himself, his brother and Hyslop, he squinted all around, and spoke:

"I heered you'd took up Parker's relinquishment. This'd be a fair place for spuds if a man would dam that coulee to irrigate from the spring run-off, but it'd take five miles of contour ditching to bring the crick around." He wasn't thinking about spuds. He was trying to see how the boys had been spending their time. "There's a good market for spuds in at Benton if you could get 'em there. Too bad Benton ain't downstream so you could float your garden truck on the current. Laws, how they pay for it at the gold camps."

"Why don't you ship by steamboat?"

He cackled out a laugh. "Try getting 'em to take anything aboard! Ridley owns a third interest in the St. Louis and Montana, and he's got the power to tell Baker and the rest of 'em where to head in, too." He kept looking around. "What you planted?"

"Señor, you perhaps accuse us of running the brand?" Hernandez said.

"Nothing yet." Pecos had dismounted. He stood with one elbow on the saddle, his manner saying that he was a cowboy, and no cowboy worth his keep would stoop to planting spuds or taking milk away from a calf.

Old Hyslop growled, "Ever have experience plantin' anything?"

He narrowed his eyes and said, "Yeah, I planted a couple o' things along my way. I planted 'em six feet deep. Why'd you ask?"

HYSLOP moved, cleared his throat, and kept his hands very wide of the old double barrelled shot pistol he had in his saddle holster. He was trying to keep watch of Jim Swing at the coulee narrows, of Hernandez who was just riding up through the sage-colored bullberry bushes, and of Pecos, all at the same time.

The second Rutledge asked, "How you expect to make the place pay?"

"Few cows. Forty or fifty. We got a brand registered. Circle B. We'll manage."

"You'll have a fight on your hands if you start running stock toward the Medicine Ridge, and that's the only place you'll find winter range. Every Jan'wary this prairie chinooks and freezes over so even a stud horse with calk shoes couldn't dig down to grass."

Hyslop, peering back through the narrows, asked, "Those your critters yonder?"

"Yes."

"Must have been just branding. We got a whiff of burning hair from 'way yonder, over the ridge."

Hernandez rode the last few yards in time to overhear him. He reined in and turned in the saddle so the butt of his six-gun was away from his body, ready to grab, "Senor, you perhaps accuse us of running the brand?"

"I ain't accusing nobody of nothing. But I do say this—*we* been accused of rustling, and we don't like it. I 'low we have to trade at Bull Sink, and I 'low that's a rustler's town, but we do it because we have to. We do it because the wildcat steamboats put in at Bull Landing, and they're the only ones that'll take our stuff aboard.

"It'd tickle Jawn Ridley pink if he could catch some of us homesteaders with brand-run cattle. Then he could go to the G.A.R. and say, *Look who you been makin' loans to, a bunch of rustlers.* Well, it ain't going to happen. I'm not sayin' you *are* rustlers. All I'm saying is that we won't tolerate rustlin' by airy one of the homesteaders, you or anybody else."

It left him red faced and out of breath. It took some guts to face them, scared as he was. He chewed savagely on his tobacco and spat.

Hernandez, playing his part, seemed ready to make trouble, but Pecos said, "Wait!" and placed himself between them. "You got nothing to worry about, Hyslop. If you think we been running brands, tell you what we'll do—we'll let Ridley or his foreman or anybody else examine 'em."

They stayed for an hour, talking about other things, and rode away.

"I theenk I saw doubt in their eyes," Hernandez said.

"That's how I wanted it. They'll talk, and the word that we're running Ridley's brand will get around. In a week it'll be to Bull Sink. Then we'll drive our critters down and see what sort of price Kansas will pay."

THEY started through the June twilight, and kept the fifty cattle at an alternate trot and walk over the broad bulge of prairie that separated the Horn from Bull Creek. Following Bull Creek they entered the badlands, a maze of barren, steep-sided buttes separated by dry canyons, a country of gray clay, whitish sandrock, with here and there a seam of lignite that weathered rusty red from its iron content. Some of the canyon walls were a vertical four or five hundred feet, with sandrock pillars towering above them still higher, and by night it seemed massive, like the rockies.

There was a fair trail down the Bull, with a trickle of water appearing and disappearing in the gravel. Along past midnight the coulee walls fell away and they reached a hundred-acre stretch of fairly level bottom where groves of cottonwoods and box elders made billowing black and silver masses by moonlight.

No one had spoken for an hour. They'd been wary, thinking about a bullet from some rustler's gun.

Pecos stopped while the cattle waded knee deep through the muck of a springhole, and Big Jim rode up beside him.

Jim said, "We must be close to that outlaw town."

Even after all the months and miles they'd drifted together it was sometimes a surprise to hear the treble quality of the big fellow's voice.

"It's yonder, I guess. Four or five mile."

"They'd sure as hell have a lookout."

"Unless Jack Kansas feels strong enough to outgun the whole country."

"Maybe he *can* outgun the country!"

"Now, there's a thought. Maybe he can. Maybe it's like Jackson Hole. They do a lot of talking about shooting the rustlers out of The Hole, too, but I don't notice 'em doing it."

"You ever been in Jackson, Kid?" Jim said.

"That's a damned dirty insult, but in point of fact, it just happens that I was."

He laughed about it and added, "Old fellow named Holzheimer and me was prospecting the headwaters of Wind River when a war party of Crows raided our camp and left us without so much as a horse, a biscuit or a blanket. We had our choice of walking all the way down to Green River on the U. P. or dropping across to The Hole, so to The Hole we went. Rustlers, robbers, army deserters, why, they were thick as Baptists in Missouri. Horse rustlers, mainly. Must have been two thousand head of horses on those big hay bottoms and not one of 'em honestly owned. Town there. Saloons, gamblin' houses, girls—they *called* 'em girls. Sweet name o' hell! The looks of some of those girls would have turned the stomach of a man that'd been skinnin' buffalo in hot weather."

"Tough town?"

"Tough! It'd make Miles City look like Pea Patch, Iowa, on Sunday mawnin'. You raid a man's cache in that town and the penalty is hanging quick as they can get a rope over a tree, but kill him in a gunfight and it wouldn't even make a subject for conversation."

"You think Bull Sink's like that?"

"I'd imagine, seeing the same talent created both of 'em. I'll wager that some of the men you'll find in Bull Sink were two weeks ago in Jackson Hole, and two weeks from now will be back there. Horse rustlin'—there's the business for a man that wants to get around. It's no accident you find so many Dakota horses down in Coloraydo."

THEY took turns sleeping and watching. At sunup the cattle were already scattered, grazing the buffalo grass that grew among the sage.

Pecos said, "They'll stay here for a couple days. We'll drift on to Bull Sink. It can't be more'n six or eight miles."

The coulee narrowed and widened again. Other coulees, equally as large, came in from east and west. The walls were no longer continuous. Here it was a country of round-topped buttes with steep sides, each one like the other so it was almost impossible to pick out a landmark anywhere.

"Gunshine," Big Jim said.

He said the word without turning. The other two stiffened a little, but didn't look around. They kept going at the same pace.

"Where?" Pecos asked.

"Almost into the sun, by that sandrock strip about a hundred yards up."

"We must have rode right by him."

"He had a good shot. He's still got a good shot if he wants it."

Finally, with three hundred yards between them, Big Jim took his hat off and mopped sweat off his broad cheeks.

"Don't that give you an itch between the shoulderblades?"

Hernandez said, "Ha! what is there to fear? Have I not already told you how the Gypsy said I would die reech and respected, in bed, with my boots off, and all my debts paid up?"

"They never told *me* any of those things."

Here the ground showed signs of considerable travel. A large canyon came in from the east, its floor trodden to dust by the hoofs of horses. A dugout shanty against one of the canyon walls overlooked several acres of horse corrals. Another turn in the coulee brought the town of Bull Sink into view.

It stood in a basin where at some prehistoric time the Missouri had gouged out a huge valley. On two sides, about a mile apart, rose steep bluffs. The ancient channel ran unobstructed to the east, but hillocks of glacial drift made a barrier in its other direction, and the present course of the river was about three and a half miles away. The glacial drift, which evidently turned the river, also dammed Bull Creek and formed a shallow lake or sink. It was almost perfectly circular, a quarter mile in diameter, ringed by soda-white alkali. The shanty buildings of the town were scattered over a low, glacial hillock beyond.

The town was larger than any of them expected. Most of the shanties had slanting, dirt-covered roofs on which wild sweet peas had taken root, making bright yellow splashes of color. Gros Ventres lived in wickiups and skin lodges that had attained a depth of filth that spoke of permanence. Counting lodges and all, there were at least thirty-five dwellings. On the highest ground, forming a short street, were some false-fronted buildings. A couple of them were built of sawed lumber which of necessity had been freighted up from the river.

The largest building, a weather-gray, ramshackle two stories bore remnants of a sign reading, "The Red Flag Dance Hall."

Hernandez exhaled, kissed his fingertips, and said. "Ha a pitfall! Filled with women! Are you not glad that I brought my guitar along? Tonight I serenade these beautiful creatures of Bull Sink weeth the love songs of all Sonora!"

"Listen, Butch, we came here on business," Pecos said.

"You choose your business and I'll choose mine. I am supposed to act like a cattle rustler, si? A bandido. In my country, when a bandido come to town, his heart cry out for love."

"You get into any trouble over one of these bedraggled dance hall skirts, and you'll damn well get out of it by yourself."

But Hernandez, his eyes closed, was strumming his guitar and singing,

Ay, ay, ay, ay!
Canta y no llores . . .

A FEW Indians watched them. Not a saddlehorse was tied along the main street. Three men, all beyond middle years, sat on a strip of platform walk in front of a dingy log saloon bearing the sign. *Dinny's Chicago Bar.*

Pecos drew up, got one leg crooked around the horn, and felt for his tobacco. "Where's everybody?"

The eldest, most bewhiskered, and filthiest of the three got his chaw of tobacco off at one side, and took his time about answering. "If you'd been here about eight hour ago you wouldn't need to ask. Wasn't a man in five mile not at the Flag watching Honeyjo Lee and that new gal of Robin's battle it out. Why is it when two women get in a ruckus they tear each other's clothes off?" He giggled. "Never saw two women do so much clothes-rippin' with so little to start with."

Hernandez alighted and cried, "Where are they now?"

"Oh, you're away too late."

They talked about other things, and finally Pecos brought up the name of Jack Kansas.

"He sleeps yonder, upstairs in the Flag. That's his joint. Partners with Legless Joe Hames. But you won't see him before afternoon. What have you boys got—some Wyomin' horses?"

"Cattle. Local stock."

"Well, I dunno. I came down here once with eight head of Two Dot mavericks and all I got for 'em was six dollar each. Kansas might give you tobacco money for 'em, but cows are a little out of his line."

Pecos got down and jingled his spurs around the hitchrack. The street was deep trodden, its dust filled with glass, shot-out cartridges and withered playing cards.

He said, "Those nesters yonder on the bench aren't *horse* rustlers."

"They're nothing if you want my estimate. If I was Kansas I'd run 'em out of here. They'll end by getting Jawn Ridley down on us."

Pecos didn't ask too many questions. He loafed around town, making acquaintances, listening, watching. Bull Sink was lawless but easygoing, filled with saddle bums, army deserters and longriders. Nobody worked, and yet there was plenty of money around.

About mid-afternoon a big, stiff-backed man with powerful legs came across from the Red Flag, gave Pecos a long, narrow scrutiny, and said, "I hear you got some cows you're thinking of selling to Jack Kansas."

Pecos got lazily to his feet and answered, "I'm open to a dicker."

Big Jim got up, too, and Hernandez came to the saloon door behind them.

"You tell your friends to stay here," the big man said, and led him across the street. As they walked he repeated Pecos' name a couple of times. "Pecos. The Pecos Kid. Are you the Pecos Kid that was neck-deep in the Bloody Clayton?"

"I was there."

"Corbus City? Mascalero?"

"Yeah."

He laughed, "Say, you been from place to place. You hunt those ruckuses out, or do you start 'em?"

"I didn't start 'em. I'm as peaceful as a jackrabbit at a rattlesnake's reunion."

"This your idea of a peaceful town?" He sounded a laugh in his bull throat. "Maybe it's your idea of a rattlesnake's reunion! You wouldn't thought it was peaceful last night. Couple of gals got to fighting over the boss and tore off everything except the skin they were born in."

They walked from sunshine to the shadow and foul air of the Red Flag, through a short hall, up some stairs. Bullets had carved rough furrows on both of the walls, but it had been long ago, and now they'd collected cobwebs and dust. "Don't say anything to the boss. He has a hanker for one of 'em."

"Honeyjo Lee?"

"Yeah, that's her. She's blastin' powder on a short fuse, that yella gal."

As they walked along a dusty upper hall the man got around to introducing himself as Hoss McFadden. He stopped at a door, and rapped, then shouted, "Jack? Here he is," and without waiting for an answer, moved inside.

Jack Kansas, dealer in long horses.

IT WAS a big room dominated by a circular poker table. Chairs, bottles and glasses were everywhere. It smelled gassy from a kerosene lamp. The lamp had been burning unnoticed since the night before, its wick deep in a glass bowl, absorbing the last drops of oil.

Hoss McFadden blew out the lamp, saying, "This place smells like a cellar after the skunks moved out. Jack, you hear me? This is the Pecos Kid."

Jack Kansas had been asleep on a leather couch. He sat up, rubbed fingers through his curly hair, and spat. He looked at Pecos as though the sight hurt his eyes and stood up. He carried his gun gambler style, high on his waist, so when he was seated his chair wouldn't get in the way. He'd been asleep with it on. His clothes were of good quality, but wrinkled. He was about Pecos' age, but twenty pounds heavier. He was round-faced, and handsome in the manner that sporting men are often handsome. He wasn't built like a cowboy, but he'd ridden a lot, one could see that in his hip-shot manner as he stood.

He picked up a bottle. It was empty. The next one was also empty. He hoisted other bottles, all empty. He cursed, threw one of them, drew his gun in the same movement, and blasted it into jagged fragments as it hit the floor. He threw another, blasting it, and another. The room was filled with gunstench and the ringing aftermath of concussion. Outside, men looked up at the room without stirring from their loafing places.

The shooting made Jack Kansas feel better. He grinned and said, "That's what I should have done to those bottles when they were full last night."

A rugged, glowering, black-whiskered man hobbled in, using a long-barrelled Sharps rifle for a crutch. His left leg was gone at the knee. He was carrying a bottle of Old Haversill Bourbon which he put down on the table. Looking at Pecos, he said:

"I hear you're holding fifty head o' cattle at Squawblanket Springs. Circle B. Just two strokes of a running iron away from a Rocking R. A good brand to get hung with."

Pecos laughed and said, "Ropeshy?"

"Yes, I'm ropeshy. You would too if you'd had two brothers hung in front of your eyes, and hanging is what'll happen to some of us if we tangle with that big lobo, Jawn Ridley. I say we're better off sticking with horses."

Kansas laughed, and winked, and said, "This is my pard, Legless Joe Hames. He used to be a real ring-tailed ripper. He'd go right up and spit in the cougar's eye."

"I'll still spit in the cougar's eye, but not in Ridley's. You take my advice you'll send this Pecos Kid out of here with his brand-run cattle and to hell with him."

"That wouldn't be cordial. I guess we'll buy those cows. How about five dollars a head? Five times fifty runs to around quarter of a thousand."

Pecos said, "You'll not buy 'em for five dollars a head."

"No? Well, that's up to you." He smiled a little and looked at Pecos with narrowed appraisal. "What do you plan to do with 'em? Take 'em back across Ridley's range? Otherwise I'll have to charge you a small fee for protection. Say—five dollars a head. Add it up this way, Kid, five you don't have to pay, plus five I'll pay you, amounts to ten dollars a head."

Legless Joe said, "I'd take those critters and not pay him so much as a Confederate dollar. Bringing 'em down here, getting Ridley on our necks—"

"Keep quiet and pour the man a drink."

Pecos cursed, downed the liquor and cursed some more. "All right. You got me. Let's see the two-fifty."

Jack Kansas paid him off in gold pieces, flipping them one after another in the air, watching them jingle to rest on the poker table. At two fifty he laughed and flipped out another double eagle.

"There. That's for a couple of drinks. Sometime maybe we'll get together and cook up a *real* deal."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Real Hellcat

AT SUNDOWN, eight weatherbeaten riders hit town driving nearly a hundred head of horses, mixed saddle and

work stock, all sweat-streaked and dusty from hard travel. With the horses inside a field west of town, the men had a meeting with Jack Kansas from which they clumped, giving out the aroma of freshly consumed whisky, their pockets ajingle with gold pieces.

Sitting at a card table, listening to their talk, Pecos learned that the horses had come from the Dakota-Minnesota border, that they would be held in Bull Sink to be swapped for a herd expected up from Wyoming—and if the Wyoming stock didn't show, for stock from Washington, Idaho or Canada. Such horses, with brands of distant registry, would be driven back by the Dakota rustlers, and disposed of openly at the horse auctions in Bismarck and Grand Forks, while Jack Kansas, for his clearing house operation, would net a profit of each sixth animal that went through his hands.

The influx of horses and money brought the languishing town to life. A grotesquely fat woman known by the name of Wattles, appeared and started hammering a piano while her undersized husband squeaked on a fiddle. Three dance hall girls with tired, kalsomined faces were in constant demand as partners at four bits a dance.

The Pecos Kid walked out when Wattles commenced to sing in a bleak, shrill soprano,

Oh pity, oh pity the drunkard's child,
A poor little waif, six years old,
Barefoot and in rags she wandered
O'er cobblestones dreary and cold.

PECOS stayed at the Chicago Bar, playing solitaire with a greasy old deck. He played game after game. Everyone was at the Red Flag. Finally Big Jim burst in.

"Kid, you come with me. We got to get him out o' there, or he'll get killed. You know what he's done? He's—"

"Sure, I know. The same thing he did at Mascalero, Tres Castillos and Lordsburg; the same as in Dodge and Coffee Creek and Cheyenne. He's after somebody's woman, but he's not buried in any o' those towns."

"He wasn't after *Jack Kansas'* woman in those towns."

Pecos carefully laid a black trey on a red four. "I'd be moved to wager that Hernandez could draw, and shoot and have time to spit before Kansas had his gun out of the leather." He could see Big Jim's underlip trembling, so he cursed, threw down the cards, and got to his feet. "All right, we'll go over there."

The Red Flag's lower floor was divided in two rooms by a colonnade of spindly pillars that had apparently been salvaged from a wrecked steamboat. Years of tobacco and lamp smoke had turned the interior a heavy brown. The bar was almost empty, with everybody pressed inside the dance hall where Wattles, her face like an enlarged tomato, was singing—

When the po-lice come to take you,
And your newfound friends forsake you
Remember your old mother deah
At ho-o-me, sweet home!

Pecos couldn't stand to look at her. He moved through, saying, "If there's one thing I can't endure it's a drunken woman." He looked around, "Well, where is this Honeyjo?"

"He had her yonder, in that box."

There were four boxes at one side of the dance hall, their fronts covered with painted, Chinese screens so their occupants could view the show without themselves being seen. There were no entrances from the dance hall side, but Big Jim knew the way, and took him down a short hall, past three doors to a fourth which was slightly ajar. Pecos looked inside. The box, a tiny cubicle, was filled with the odor of cigar, brandy and a woman's perfume, but no one was there.

Outside, a shout had gone up, drowning out Wattles' song. She tried to shrill over it, then she gave up and retreated to the piano, where she commenced hammering a Negro steamboater's chanty, *The Yellow*

Gal of Natchez. It was still a few seconds before Pecos, looking through the dusty, painted screen, saw the cause of the outburst.

A GIRL had come out on the tiny stage. She was dark, slim in the waist with full hips and bosom. She was not dressed like one of those bedraggled dance hall girls. She wore a dress of amber satin that brushed the floor. It was a simple dress without ruffles or folderols. It might have been merely a strip of silk wrapped around her body with a tuck here, and one there, letting her own lines do the rest.

Her skin under the oil lamps had a tawny cast. She reminded Pecos of some jungle cat, ready to rub and purr at one second, or claw you to pieces the next. She smiled. Her teeth against her red-dyed lips and her dark skin seemed very white. As white as bits of shell. Her eyeballs had a white shine, too. She had black blood. She was a quadroon or an octoroon. Once, in New Orleans during the war, he'd been at the quadroon's ball and had seen a girl who was almost her counterpart playing her favors from one young Creole to another, waiting with sulky indifference for the trouble to start.

He whistled softly and said, "That her? That Honeyjo Lee?"

"Yes, that's her, and there's nothing she'd rather do than get two men to killing each other."

"I don't wonder she had an audience when that clothes rippin' started last night."

Pecos wanted a better look at her. He managed to slide one segment of the screen. She heard the sound and looked at him. She looked and kept looking. She sang with a half smile, swinging her lips in time with the music. She passed among the tables, and one of the men made a grab for her, but with a clever, sinuous movement she got out of his grasp.

Jack Kansas was seated in the lookout's chair above the faro spread. She passed close to him, ignoring him, her eyes on the Pecos Kid.

Pecos said to Jim from the side of his mouth, "I'm the one you should be dragging out."

"*You* don't go clean loco over women."

"I might over this one."

She finished her song and walked out of sight through the barroom. A little later she appeared in the doorway, smiled at Pecos, and said, "I drink brandy. *Portuguese* brandy. They got it. Especially fo' me, they got it. I'm letting you buy it fo' me tonight."

Jim cried, "Pecos, listen here—"

"Too late, Jim. You made a noble try, but I got no more strength of resistance than Hernandez. On your way out, tell 'em to send the Portuguese brandy."

She watched Big Jim back out, watched the door swing partly closed. Outside they were whooping it up and throwing silver money around, wanting more verses of *The Yellow Gal of Natchez,* but she paid no attention. She reached a hand, very soft, and strong and brown, got hold of Pecos' arm, and pulled him to the chair beside her.

THE SCREEN was still open. He suddenly realized that they were visible to Jack Kansas who still occupied the lookout chair.

Kansas had a cigarette between his lips. He spat it out, and stood, hitching up both his tight-fitting pants and his gun belt.

Pecos didn't try to get out of sight. He said, "You'd like to get me killed, wouldn't you?"

"Yo' scared o' *him?* I didn't think you'd be scared o' any man. Not the Pecos Kid. Not the man that outdrew Star Glynn."

"I guess you had the right man already tonight. It was Hernandez who outdrew Star Glynn."

She laughed, showing her strong white teeth. Now, seen closely, she wasn't so

Suddenly the door was booted open and Kansas stood there.

dark. Her skin was no darker than a south European's.

Jack Kansas was no longer in sight, but other men were watching. Legless Joe Hames stood against the far wall, propped on the Sharps rifle.

Pecos waved at Hoss, grinned, and slid the screen shut. Her arm was around his neck. She sat in his lap. She took his head in both hands and pulled it hard against her bosom.

"I think you're the man for me, all right."

"But are you the woman for me?"

"I'm *plenty* o' woman." Smiling, she drew a little, slimbladed dagger. "I should slit your throat. After I kiss yo', I'll slit your throat."

She stabbed the dagger in the table and kissed him. He wondered which would be worse, to have Kansas come through the door, or Hernandez. She leaned back. Her

hair, in jet ringlets, hung toward the floor. Her eyes were closed, waiting for him to kiss her.

He was, "You wouldn't want a man to get shot over you!" He called her a name, and said, "No, you wouldn't!" and he kissed her.

Suddenly the door was booted open, and Kansas was there.

Instantly she was on her feet, between them. She faced Kansas. Her lips were drawn thin with contempt. She was ready to spit at him. Her voice was pitched so it could be heard in every part of the building:

"Get out! Get out before Pecos kills you. He said you were a yellow horse thief. He said he'd kill you if you followed us."

He thought Kansas was going for his gun. He turned to get free of the table. His own gun was in his hand, but Kansas was trying to tear himself away from the girl. She'd sprung forward and was holding his right forearm with both hands.

He hurled her away. The chair was behind her. The backs of her thighs hit it, and she fell over it to the floor.

Kansas gave no thought to Pecos nor the gun in his hand. He sprang after her and kicked her in the stomach. She managed to wrap her arms around his knees. He booted her away while Pecos tried to get past the table and the overturned chairs.

He'd have killed her under the hard heels of his boots, but Pecos grabbed him and flung him against the wall. He started back with his left hand outstretched, his right on the butt of his .45. But the gun in Pecos' hand stopped him.

Kansas got his breath. Exertion had burned out some of his rage. He forked a lock of curly hair away from his forehead, jerked out a laugh, and said,

"Maybe you think you're taking her over."

"I might."

"No, I like you too well. I even like the Spaniard too well."

Honeyjo was on her knees. She panted and caught her breath, but she wasn't crying. Only catlike fury showed on her face.

She hissed, "I'll kill you! And I'll kill that other woman!"

He bent over, grabbed her by the bodice of her dress, struck her with the heel of his palm, knocking her halfway through the door.

Hernandez was there. He tried to catch her. The force of her knocked him backward. He started for his gun, but Pecos cried, "No!"

Hernandez checked himself. He looked both ways, saw Hoss McFadden with a gun drawn, and Legless Joe Hames leaning against the wall, his Sharps rifle up and ready.

"Eh? You need all these guns to beat one poor woman?"

McFadden said, "All right, greaser. You may be considerable of a lead merchant in your parts, but these ain't your parts. They're our'n. So keep your hands clear of that gun or I'll hit you with this .45 and turn you so's the hair side's in."

The Pecos Kid said, "Let's get out of here," and led Hernandez across the street.

CHAPTER SIX

Rendezvous at Trapper Springs

PECOS slept in a room above the Red Flag. Next day he heard that Honeyjo had been put aboard a river steamer bound for Benton, but that night, on entering his room, he knew she was there, close, in the darkness, waiting for him.

He closed the door and stood with his back against it. The odor of French perfume was heavy on the air. He took a step, reaching out, expecting to find her.

Then her husky voice came, unexpectedly, behind him, "Yo' alone?"

"Yes."

"Light a match. I got the window shaded."

He struck the match, lighted a stub of

candle. She stood beside the door, the little dagger still in her hand. She wore a black dress, drenched and clinging; it had been torn by brush; its seam had collected cockleburs and little, sticky seed balls of sage.

He said, "I thought you'd be twenty miles toward Benton."

She laughed and said, "Lot o' people think they know all about Honeyjo. They wrong. Nobody know what Honeyjo will do. Honeyjo had to come back and see you."

"Thanks. But what's the *real* reason?"

"Maybe I'd still like to see yo' kill Jack Kansas."

"You do your own killing. I got nothing against Kansas."

"No-o?" She kept smiling. She got his tobacco and papers, rolled a cigarette, and leaned with the candlelight strong against her face to light it. "Maybe yo' better kill Kansas befo' he kill you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothin'. I just tell yo' that little bit."

He grabbed her by the arm and spun her around. *"What do you mean?"*

"Yo' leave me alone. I'll let out a yell and you'll wish you left me alone. They come up here and fin' me here, what they goin' to think? They'll think you got me back after Kansas sent me away."

"What have you got against him?"

"Why yo' think?" She tossed her head back, a vindictive movement. "Yo' think any woman likes to be second best? Well, some women, maybe, but not Honeyjo! Honeyjo never be second best!"

"Who was it? That girl of Robin's?"

"Her? No. I'll tell yo' who! That *good* girl. That girl from yonder." She jerked her head toward the west.

"What's her name?"

"I don't know. I never found out her name. I knew he was meetin' somebody. I could smell her perfume every time he got back. He'd take a long ride, to meet some o' them Dakota rustlers, *he* said, but when he came back, he smelled, and it wasn't no rustler smell. Laws, I been around heah long enough to know rustler smell."

"That's what you came back to tell me?"

"Yeah."

"Didn't you follow him?"

"I followed him. Found out where he went. Yonder, over west, to that little cabin at Trapper Spring. It was after night, and I didn't git close enough to see who she was, only she left ridin' side-saddle, like a lady. Like a lady from one o' the *big ranches.*"

"You know who she is!"

"No!" She backed off from him, her hand under her dress, once again on the dagger. "Don't get rough with Honeyjo! Honeyjo will—"

"Why'd you think *I* gave a damn whether he had a woman from one of the big ranches?"

She laughed with a toss of her dark ringlets. "Yo' be interested, all right. Yo' interested in everything that Kansas does. I reckon yo'd like to know how he's always ready and mo' than ready when them cattlemen yonder decide they'll clean out Bull Sink. Honeyjo's mighty smart gal. Honeyjo finds out things. You tread easy here, boy, or one o' your steps will land yo' in a hole six feet deep, and they'll be throwin' dirt in your face. Now I've said all I'm going to. I'm leaving. Horseback. And yo' gettin' the horse fo' me."

He grabbed her wrist, "How much does Kansas know?"

"He don' know as much as Honeyjo or you wouldn't even be alive."

WITH a downward twist she got away. He made another grab for her and missed. She blew out the candle. She wasn't where he expected. He heard her laugh, the drape was torn off the window, he saw her silhouetted against the moonlight from outside.

She said, "Use yo' head, boy, somebody'll hear us."

She slid outside, hung for a second with her legs dangling, her hands on the sill. Then, wrapping her dress to keep it from catching, she dropped, and he could hear the soft thud of her feet striking the ground.

A second later he dropped from the window after her.

It was unfamiliar ground. His high-heeled boots made him fall. She got hold of him and said, "Where's yo' horse?"

He took her around to the stable. The hostler, a big, halfwitted boy, was asleep in the oat bin. No one else around. Working quietly, he saddled a chestnut horse and led him out.

"Yo' crazy? That's Kansas' favorite bronc."

"Nothing's too good for you, Honeyjo. Now tell me just how much Kansas knows."

She got one foot in the stirrup, smiled with a flash of her teeth, and whispered, "One thing, he don' know as much as Honeyjo. No damn man know as much as Honeyjo. Got to say goodbye now. Yo' look me up sometime in Fo't Benton, boy. Yo' do that if yo' still alive."

The horse was willing to run, and she let him, hitting the rough, winding alley at a gallop.

The hostler still snored. Someone had opened the rear door of the Red Flag, and he could hear Wattles singing *The Night Fair Charlotte Froze to Death by the Dreary Mountainside.*

The door closed again, and he knew it was Hernandez.

"Butch!"

"Eh, you, Keed. It was a very peculiar theeng. I was upstairs, to your room, where there is nothing but the smell of French perfume. I would almost think that girl did not leave on the steamboat after all."

"Butch, a man needs something besides a guitar and a stick of mustache wax to attract women. Me, now—I just kick 'em and leave 'em, and they still swim rivers to get to me."

THERE was commotion in the morning over the theft of the horse, but no one thought of questioning Pecos. Later, visiting the barn to feed his own horse, he found the hostler cowering in the oat bin, his face, neck and shoulders bloody from a whip lashing.

Pecos' face looked lean, and he fought down an angry tremble when he asked. "Who quirted you?"

"I ain't telling nothing. They'd only whip me some more."

Later he learned that the quirting had been administered by Hoss McFadden. It made him a little sick. He felt to blame because of the hostler, but there was nothing he could do.

He was seated before the Chicago bar, hat over his eyes, apparently asleep when Jim hunted him out.

"See what they did to that poor, feeble-minded kid?"

He opened his eyes and barked, "Well, why come to me? There's nothing I can do about it."

"Say, you're ringy this morning."

Pecos said, "Sorry," and after looking around to make sure no one was in earshot, he told about Honeyjo's visit of the night before.

With alarm in his eyes, Jim said, "She must have an idea we're working for Jawn Ridley. We better get out o' here."

"It'd be sensible."

"I'll find Butch right now."

"I just said it'd be sensible. You go and take Butch if you like, but I'll stay for awhile. Thought I might sort of trail over to Trapper Springs." He laughed at Big Jim who was trying to watch both ways down the street at once. "Hell, Jim, if Kansas had an idea we were working for Ridley we'd have no more to worry about—we'd be dead."

He sat through the heat of afternoon,

rousing only to roll a cigarette, or brush away the bulldog flies that had become numerous and sticky with the advent of hot weather. The town remained quiet. He ate supper at Big Jim's grubpile, and returned after sunset. A two-bit monte game had finally broken up, and one of the participants, a filthy, lousy old wolfer bummed him for tobacco and papers. He stopped scratching long enough to roll one and said,

"They'll be hell amongst the squaws tonight. Clode Hattersly just came in from Trapper Springs."

Pecos thought little about it until he noticed three riders heading down one of the backtrails from town. Twilight prevented him being sure, but he had a strong hunch that one of them was Jack Kansas.

PECOS saddled his horse and set out at an easy amble, apparently headed toward the steamboat landing, but when the town was out of sight he spurred at an alternate trot and gallop up the big cottonwood-filled coulee that would lead him to Trapper Springs.

He saw nothing of Kansas or the other two. The moon came up. He hunted a way along the cutbank sides, through buckbrush and rose thorns. He traveled steadily for better than an hour. Ahead of him the coulee narrowed through walls of sheer sandrock, forcing him back to the main trail.

He'd never been to Trapper Springs, but it had been described to him, and he knew it was just ahead. On the night breeze he could smell the damp clay and swamp odors of a springhole. He moved slowly, through huge boulders, hunting their shadow.

Pecos dismounted, removed his spurs, led his horse across treacherous footing, among angular boulders big as cabins. He tied the reins to a juniper trunk, and climbed on. He was careful to keep his heels from scraping the rock. He hunted shadow where there was shadow, ran in swift silence where there wasn't.

Thickets of bullberries choked the narrows giving concealment. He had to crawl on hands and knees. Then there was yielding clay underfoot, and he had his first look at the Springs.

The coulee bottom was quite flat, an eighth of a mile in width, and about a mile in length. There was a cabin and some corrals below and to his right. He got down, concealed by some sage clumps, and watched the cabin.

Someone was moving. It was Jack Kansas, on foot, walking up from the spongy bottoms of a little creek, approaching the cabin.

Pecos followed, staying with the bank. He lost sight of him beyond the corrals. He watched, but Kansas didn't reappear.

The uphill corner of a corral checked him. Below, among box elder trees, he could see part of the cabin roof. He sat down, slid beneath the fence, kept sliding, digging the heels of his boots, and stopped against the inner wall of the corral.

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He remained on one knee, and listened. After what seemed to be a long wait, he heard the jingle of spurs and someone approached the house. A door creaked on wooden hinges, and a second later a girl spoke,

"Hello, Kansas."

He expected it, and yet it was a shock that hit him hard—the voice belonged to Letty Stinchfield.

PECOS cursed through his teeth. He stood up, looked for them through the corral poles. Brush and trees were in the way. He moved along until there was an opening and he had a view of one side of the cabin, and of the path leading up from the creek.

They were there, two shadows, the girl close to the cabin, standing still, Kansas climbing the path.

She had on a riding skirt, perhaps the same one she'd worn that night at the Citadel. She was taller and slimmer than he remembered. She waited for Kansas, standing straight, her head up, her shoulders back, her hands braced on her hips.

"So you *did* send for me!" Kansas said with a laugh, and Pecos knew by the tone that she must have sworn *never* to send for him.

She jerked her head and said, "I came to find about that bay horse of mine. I never sent for you."

Kansas laughed. "Now, darling! That's a pretty poor story."

He took another stride covering the distance between them, caught her with his left arm around the small of her back, and drew her to him.

She bent back. Their faces were close together for a few seconds. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head sharply. Moonlight revealed her expression. She was smiling, defiant, and contemptuous. She tried to get out of his grasp, but he'd expected that, and had drawn her arm in a hammerlock.

"You rode a long way, darling. You rode too far to fight very hard. You been dreaming about this every night for a month, why don't you admit it?"

He kept laughing, backing with her as she struggled to get away, putting enough pressure on the hammerlock to *keep* her from getting away.

They were out of Pecos' sight, but he could still hear them, the scrape of their feet, their quick breathing. It was quiet for a second, and he heard the creak and drag of the door. He thought they were inside, but soon he heard them talking, Kansas still teasing her, the girl panting from effort, speaking through her teeth.

They were quiet then. He listened for what seemed to be a long time. He climbed the fence, dropped to the other side, found a crooked little path down the slope, through dwarfed, wide-branching box elder trees.

Now he could hear the girl again. He thought for a second she was crying. She wasn't. She was laughing. They were barely visible against the log wall of the cabin. Jack Kansas had backed her there. He'd dropped the hammerlock. He had one hand braced on each side of her, and when she tried to move one way or the other, he lowered that arm to stop her. He kept talking in her ear and she kept laughing.

He forced himself to stand still and listen. He had a job to do for Jawn Ridley. He was doing his job now. He had little doubt that she was the one who kept Kansas informed of everything at the Citadel.

SHE was doing the talking, and Kansas, with his ear bent close to her lips, was listening. Her voice was something less than a whisper. Pecos picked up a word or two at random, but they told him nothing.

Kansas had hold of her again, and she was fighting him off. Before, her struggle had been halfhearted. But not now. This

was the real thing. She fought with teeth and claw, with the savage fury of a lynx cat.

Kansas held her as she twisted half way around. She fell, and he was on one knee bent over her. He made a grab as she got away. She turned over. She was in a half sitting position, one leg stretched out, the other bent beneath her. Her riding skirt was made with wings like a pair of chaps, and these, twisting around her legs, tangled her movements, momentarily tied her down. He bent to grab her, and stopped. Moonlight made a little, steely gleam on the object in her hand. It was the double derringer.

Kansas managed to laugh. "You would not shoot me!"

She hissed, "Get back!"

"Here, kid. Give it to me. Come on, give it to me. Little girls shouldn't play with weapons." As he talked, he edged closer. He raised his voice, "I said give it to me!"

"Get away!"

"No, darlin'—"

He started to grab, and the little gun roared, throwing flame and lead from close range. The slug hit him. It knocked him a quarter way around. He grabbed some projecting logs by the door and saved himself from falling. By his posture Pecos knew he'd been hit in the left arm.

"You hell-cat! I should kill you. Woman or not—"

"Keep away from your gun."

She meant it. He didn't follow her further. Her horse was among the box elder trees. He cursed her as she galloped off. He kept cursing as Hoss McFadden and the other man came up from the creek. "I can catch her, Jack!" Hoss said.

"Let her go. Catching her is a job I'll keep for myself. "

"Tonight?"

"Tonight? Hell, no. I took a slug in the arm. Here—scratch a match and let's have a look at it. . . ."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unmasked

PECOS, after hard riding, entered Bull Sink by one of the side trails. He pulled the saddle off his tired mount, and put it on a fresh one from Kansas' string. Then he walked around to the main street looking for Hernandez and Big Jim.

Big Jim saw him and came clump-clumping with long strides from the Chicago Bar. "Kid! I'm glad to see you. We got to hammer some brains into that Mexican's head. You know what he's up to now?"

"I'd lay gold against Jeff Davis dollars he's chasing women."

"He's after that gal o' Robin's and so's that Dakota rustler, Celden Frye."

"You better worry about Frye. Maybe you haven't noticed, but Butch is what I'd call nifty with a gun."

"Frye's got men backing him. Sometimes I almost wish Butch would get a bullet through him, not serious, o' course, but enough to teach him a lesson. I seen men foolish about women, but Butch—"

Big Jim had been steering across to the Red Flag.

"Is he in here?"

"I suppose."

Legless Joe Hames, propped on his Sharps rifle, was near the door, chewing tobacco, watching them. They asked about Hernandez, and he spat on the floor and answered, "Ain't seen him."

Jim said, "He's in this place!"

Hames shifted his weight off the Sharps and raised his voice, "Well, find him yourself."

Pecos pulled Big Jim along, saying, 'Don't argue. We'll look upstairs."

Climbing, Jim said, "So you *are* worried about Butch!"

They walked from one door to another, beating on the panels, opening them when no one answered. No sign of him.

They went back to the street, and from place to place, still without finding any trail of him.

Pecos said, "You don't suppose he's at one o' those Gross Ventre teepees."

"Not Butch. He wouldn't—"

"He'd do anything."

A halfbreed boy came across the street on silent moccasins and stood looking at them with his dark eyes. "For four bits I will show you where the Spaniard is."

Pecos flipped him the coin. "See? What'd I tell you? He's over with the Gros Ventres, and if he ends up lousy he'll be looking for a new partner."

The halfbreed, however, took them in the opposite direction from the Indian camp, around shacks and sheds, across bottle heaps to the rear door of the *Red Flag.*

"We came out o' there not fifteen minutes ago."

The breed, without seeming to hear him, led him up the stairs to the one door they had not tried—the one leading to Jack Kansas' room.

He rapped and said, "Me, Joe."

The door opened instantly. It was Jack Kansas. The kid jumped out of the way, and they could see that Kansas had a sawed-off shotgun hooked under his arm, aimed, the hammers back.

"Don't try it, boys." he said. "There's a man behind you."

"Yeah, your damned right there is." Hoss McFadden had been standing in the dim end of the hall. Now he plodded up with a .45 in each hand. "Just keep walkin'. Go inside. The Mex is waitin' for you."

Kansas moved to let them through the doorway. His left shirt sleeve was stained with blood. He still had his spurs on, the saddle wrinkles hadn't yet shaken from his wool pants. Apparently he'd dismounted only minutes before.

Pecos walked so close the muzzle of the shotgun brushed his arm, and saw Hernandez seated with his boots on the edge of the table, grinning at them.

"So, Senors! You are out trying to break up the love affairs of your Hernandez one time too many! Behold the buxom beauty I make love to thees night!"

He gestured at a chinless little man with a pimply face and a nose like a tomahawk who sat against the wall covering him with a Colt revolver.

Pecos laughed, sounding easy about it, and drawled, "Why, you're in an even worse fix than usual."

"Si, and thees time it is not of my doing. Not *my* woman. It was *your* woman, that Honeyjo weeth her steenking French perfume. Now pay the man for his horse you stole for her so he will free us of our imprisonment."

KANSAS had followed them in. He said, "I'm glad to know where the horse went to, but I'm afraid there's still a couple things that have to be cleared up." Reaching around from behind, he took Pecos' gun, and then Big Jim's, and tossed them on the couch. He was smiling in a knowing, unpleasant way. "Thing I'd like to know is this—what's the *real* reason you came down here to the Sink?"

"Why, you remember. We were broke. We had a few head of cows. After selling 'em to you, we were still broke."

"Nobody sent you down here? Jawn Ridley, for instance."

"Now what gave you an idea like that?"

Kansas wasn't in a good mood. Each time he moved his wounded left arm he winced. "Don't get too smart. I knew somebody'd been staked out here, spying on us. And now I know who it is. It's you."

"I don't reckon you do. If you did, you wouldn't give us a chance to plead innocent. You'd just have shot us when we came up the stairs."

"You were all the way north to Milk River. Then you turned around and came back. You rode straight to the Citadel. No use of denying it, I know you did."

"O'course we did. That was the only ferry that wasn't washed out. And they always feed a drifter at Ridley's. Don't you reckon that's reason enough?"

Hoss shouted, "It's not reason enough for us!"

A long stride had brought Hoss up behind him. He knew the blow was coming and tried to turn. The barrel of a gun clipped him on the skull. It was like explosion inside his brain. He was down, the slivery floor under his hands. He reached, got hold of the table, pulled himself to his knees.

Hoss was still behind him. "Should I let him have another?"

Kansas said, "Wait. Maybe he's ready to talk. How about it, Pecos? Would you rather tell your story or have your skull caved in?"

Pecos said, "I need a drink."

Hoss walked around him, put one of his guns away, poured, whiskey in a tincup, and threw it in his face.

It blinded him. He wiped it away with his shirt sleeve. He kept wiping it away, pretending to be blinded after things became visible.

Hernandez was still at the edge of his chair, the pimply faced man's gun in his back. Kansas had turned his shotgun on Big Jim who'd retreated a couple of steps toward the wall. Three six guns lay on the couch where Kansas had put them. They were only a long dive and grab away, but he'd be a dead man if he tried to make a play for them.

Kansas was saying, "Live or die, Kid. Up to you."

"What?"

"Pour him a drink, Hoss. And this time let him drink it."

Pecos said, "I need a smoke."

"All right, have a smoke."

THEY WATCHED Pecos get tobacco and papers out of his pocket. He rolled one, licked it into shape. He had his mind on reaching for the lamp, but Kansas was wary for tricks.

"None o' that, Kid. You might get foolish. The second you tried to dump that lamp I'd kill you. Then you'd never get your story told, and I'd never hear it."

Hoss said, "Just stay put. I'll light it for you."

He lifted the lamp, held it by its bowl, tilted it so the chimney was beneath the tip of the cigarette. Pecos only had to drag to get it lighted.

He still seemed to be groggy. He kept shaking his head. He took the cigarette from his lips.

"You knocked one of my teeth loose."

"From behind? How in hell could I a' done that?"

Pecos bared his teeth and as Hoss looked, he laid the coal of his cigarette on the back of his hand.

It took a half second for pain to hit him.

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The big man yelled and started back, still holding the lamp. Pecos' toe was behind his bootheel, and he fell.

The lamp struck the floor. The chimney broke, but not the bowl.

Pecos dived forward. The air was ripped by flame and explosion. Both barrels of the sawed-off. He could feel the wind-whip of flying buckshot, the splinter and thud as it tore into the wall.

He reached the couch. The guns were there. His hands found them, and he rolled over with a gun in each hand. He fired. The buck and roar felt good to him. The room rocked with a blazing crossfire. Then it stopped.

Flame still clung to the wick of the upset lamp. It looked brownish through powder smoke. He'd had an impression of men charging for cover, of a man falling, of someone diving through the open window. He got to his feet. He moved along with the wall at his back. The side of one foot touched something yielding and heavy. A man's body.

Suddenly, sick-frightened, he said, "Butch!"

Men were struggling. He could feel the

"Horses!" Big Jim was bellowing. "Damn it, didn't you want horses?"

heavy shifting of weight, labored grunting. They fell with a crash over chairs.

Hoss' voice—"Damn it, you're breakin' my arm."

Big Jim—"Stand up!"

"Yeah."

"Open the door."

The lamp flame was now racing along cracks in the floor where the kerosene had flowed.

Pecos whispered louder, "Butch!"

An answering came from an unexpected direction, "Here, Señor!"

Relief at finding him alive made Pecos want to laugh and cry at the same time. "We got to get the hell out of here."

"Si, and queeck."

Firelight revealed the body of the skinny, pimply man, face down, his arms spread-eagled, a dark smear of blood under his left side. No sign of Kansas. It had been Kansas who'd gone through the window.

Men had been shouting in the saloon below. Now they were pouring up the stairs. They were in the hall like a cattle stampede.

Big Jim, with McFadden's two arms in a double hammerlock, had forced him to the door.

Pecos cried, "No, Jim. It's no use. It'll have to be the window."

Hernandez said, "Where is that peeg, Kansas? Did we not kill him?"

PECOS was by the window. The flames silhouetted him. From below came twin flashes of explosion. A bullet carved the window-casing by his waist, another shattered the glass over his head and stung him with flying fragments.

He fired back, and went for cover. The room was suffocating with heat and the raw stench of burning oil.

Hernandez, choking, gasped, "Thees is one hell of a place you got us into, Keed."

"*I* got you into? If you hadn't been chasing that woman of Robin's—" He didn't have the breath left to finish it. He started to cough and couldn't stop. It made his lungs raw.

"Get out!" he gasped. "Jim, get out. The window. I'll cover you!"

Jim let go his hammerlock and came across the room. A gargantuan figure, he stumbled over a chair. He grabbed the windowsill and took a massive breath.

"Get out!" Pecos shouted.

Big Jim started head foremost through the opening. Balanced with head and shoulders down, he clawed for handholds without finding them. Pecos grabbed him by his thighs and dumped him overboard.

They were shooting from below and he fired back. His guns were empty. "Butch! Where are you? Get ou' o' here."

"The hell weeth you, Senor. It is your turn."

"*I* ain't arguing!" Hoss McFadden bellowed and charged past. A bullet hit him. He grunted as though he'd been struck by a sledge. He held for a second to the window casing, then his fingers gave way, and he sprawled back first toward the ground.

Pecos went through after him, with Hernandez close behind.

Pecos picked himself up from the ground. Pain knifed through his foot and up his leg.

"Where's Jeem?" Hernandez whispered.

Jim was only a couple of steps away. "Here I am. I feel like my neck was broke."

Pecos got thimself balanced against the wall. He'd turned his ankle. He was trying his weight on it. "We got to get to the corral."

Light from the flaming window suddenly struck them. They crawled to the concealment of a rubbish heap, on to some sheds, and to the corral.

The halfwitted boy was cowering in the oat bin. Pecos stuck an empty gun in his face and shouted the single word, "Horses!"

Pecos followed him outside, fingering cartridges from his belt, feeding them into the cylinder of the .45's.

Jim grabbed him, "Give me my gun."

"Help the kid. I'll do the shooting."

Flames now poured from the upper window of the Red Flag. They burst through the roof. They raced through the flimsy, dried-out building. It created a roaring draft. The building was a torch, lighting the ground for a hundred yards around with the brightness of sunrise.

"Horses!" Big Jim was bellowing. "Damn it, didn't you want horses?"

They ran across the corral where wild bullets cut furrows through dusty hoof-trodden manure. Jim and the hostler were holding three horses.

"Mine's saddled, back of that shed," Pecos said.

"Hell of a time to tell us."

"Maybe we'll need an extra one the way the lead's flying."

They rode off at a gallop, hunting the long shadows of buildings. There was no sound of pursuit. After a mile Hernandez drew to a sliding halt and cried:

"My guitar! Oh, my sweetheart, how could I leave you behind in that dive, *Dinny's Chicago Bar?* Señors, do not try to stop me. I must return for my guitar."

"Let him go," Pecos said, getting hold of Big Jim's bridle. "He'll come back all right. You know what the Blackfeet say about crazy men—the Lord watches over them."

"They'll kill him!"

"No, he's got the word of a gypsy they won't. Don't you remember? Butch is going to die of rheumatics at the age of eighty-five."

They rode slowly to the springs where they'd camped that first night. The air was cool, and very clear. Across the miles separating them from Bull Sink, came the occasional high-pitched sounds of men's voices. A glow of fire was still in the sky. It slowly died. Then, after long waiting there was another sound—a voice backed by the soft rhythm of a guitar. It was Hernandez, singing,

"Ay, ay, ay, ay!
Canta y no llores . . ."

"You see?" Pecos said, "the Blackfeet are right."

* * *

They rode through night and dawn, and morning heat. The homestead shack had an abandoned, dismal look even in the brilliant light of afternoon. They stopped to graze their horses and sleep for a few hours, and awoke with the sun dropping toward the horizon.

Cursing the packrats which had made off with both bacon and jerky, Big Jim stirred up a mess of plain flour and salt doughgods.

"We still homesteaders?" Hernandez asked.

Pecos said, "Oh, hell, no. It was a bum idea from the start. Kansas knows who we're working for. These Union sobbusters will know, too, as soon as one of 'em visits Bull Sink. Best we can do is drift back to the Citadel and break the news to Jawn Ridley."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jawn Ridley's Son

AT THE Citadel, Jawn Ridley heard Pecos' story with his heavy jaw set, a steady frown on his face.

He lighted a Havana cigar and walked off, leaving its rich fragance behind. From the bay window he had a view of jackpine hills, of terraces, of limitless prairie benches dropping one after another toward the Big Dry—all part of his domain.

Pecos said, "I was high-carded, but they did it with a marked deck."

"Sure, sure. Not blaming you, Major. In fact I think you did very well. You're sure it was safe for you to come back here in broad daylight?"

"Thinking of those sodbusters? They'll know we work for you next visit they make to Bull Sink."

"Sure, sure. Still, your mission wasn't exactly fruitless. Glass of something? Sherry? Brandy?"

His mind was on other things, Pecos could tell that by his eyes. He seemed little interested in things at Bull Sink. Once before Pecos had had the impression that Ridley cared little whether he cleaned the rustlers out or not. After all, they had little to do with cattle, and their horse exchange business hurt Wyoming and Dakota raisers more than they did outfits like Ridley and Stinchfield who were close at hand.

"A marked deck," Ridley repeated, talking Havana smoke from his mouth. He stood with his powerful legs wide set, his hands clasped behind him. A finely wrought, ivory handled gun of some unfamiliar make was strapped high around

his waist, carried in a cut-away holster, and Pecos found himself wondering how well Ridley could go for it, and deciding that he could probably go for it well indeed, like he went for everything else he wanted. "Marked deck. Yes, that's an apt term. Trust a Confederate to find an apt term. These Yankees—" He called them a vile name. "They'll not slice up my range and brand my cattle for the benefit of those brigands at Bull Sink!"

"Seh, according to my observation, they're not."

He whirled, and for the first time fury showed on his face. "Whose side are you on?"

"Why, up till now I reckoned it was your side."

"Up till *now?*"

"I went yonder to find out who was informing against us at Bull Sink, and who was furnishing the cattle that kept those boys in business."

"Oh. Sure, sure. Sorry, Major. Well, who *is* informing against us at Bull Sink?"

"I don't know."

He laughed with a surprised, half contemptuous jerk of his head. "You still haven't got an idea?"

"I got an almighty good idea, but I'm not saying till I'm sure. That's for your good as well as anyone else's."

"*My* good." He opened his eyes and there was a hint of a smile on his lips. "For instance, my own son?" Then he shook it off. "No, it wouldn't be Albert." He walked to the massive, mahogany table and drove his fist on it so hard the humidor of cigars jumped an inch. "My God, man, how I wish he did have guts enough! I'd rather he'd be a traitor than what he is. At least a traitor sometimes has the guts of a man."

"Oh come, seh, I'm sure the boy—"

"You don't need to save my feelings. You know what the boy is. You knew from the first night. Piano player, scribbler. And the joke is, I built all this for him."

"He's still a boy."

"At his age I rode in the cavalry with a cutlass in my hand, and so did you. I have punchers his age who have ridden the long trail from Texas."

"He's still a boy if you never gave him a chance to grow up."

"*I've* given him his chance. And I'll give him more chances. He'll not go to St. Louis. His mother can go to St. Louis if she wants, but *he'll stay here.* I'll make a man of him yet I'll make a man of him or kill him. Does that sound like an unnatural way for a father to talk? I still say it. *I'll make a man of him or kill him.*"

PECOS went outside. A man stood on the porch, one boot propped on the rail, staring off toward the river. He carried a brace of .45's low and tied down to his thighs. The silver conchos on his belt told Pecos that this was the same tall gunman who'd been in that exact spot when he emerged from Ridley's office the first night.

"You always stand there, seh?" he said in his easy drawl.

The man turned abruptly. He looked at Pecos with narrowed eyes. He had buck teeth, and a loose underjaw. There was something subnormal about his expression, yet his eyes had an animal intelligence, like a weasel's.

"If I want to stand here, I guess that's my business."

"Yours and Ridley's. No offense. I just like to pass the time of day. I'm called the Pecos Kid." His eyes traveled to the open window just back of them. He had a hunch the man had been listening, and that he'd been listening the other night. "But I'd wager you knew already."

He didn't catch the significance of the remark. He said, "Yeah, I knew already." He got the band of his pants and his two gunbelts in one movement, hitching them all up. "My name's Garde. Carris Garde." He twisted his loose jaw in a smile. "Maybe you heard o' *me,* too."

"Should I have?"

Pecos walked on. He didn't like him, and he didn't pretend to like him. *Carris Garde.* He kept repeating the name as he walked down, past the bunkhouses. He couldn't remember where he'd heard it before.

A young wrangler was inside one of the corrals, preparing to take the rough spots off a sorrel bronc. Pecos saw Hernandez, climbed to the corral beside him, and asked, "You ever heard of a gunman named Carris Garde?"

"The two-gun man of the beeg house? Si. From Utah. I have heard he killed five men. He was a deputy under Sampson at Silver City. But Sampson had to get rid of him. Sometimes Sampson wished to arrest a man *alive,* while Carris would always breeng them in dead."

"I suppose he just walked up and said, *Go for your guns.* And then, wham!"

Hernandez laughed with a flash of his white teeth. "Or else, because of his great kindness, he just shot them in the back. *Quien sabe?*" He pointed his cigarette at the bronc that had just tossed his rider and was now sunfishing around, kicking dirt in his face. "If Señor Ridley would let me add thees fine sorrel to my string, perhaps I would go in there and show that boy how a rough horse should be smoothed off. What you theenk?"

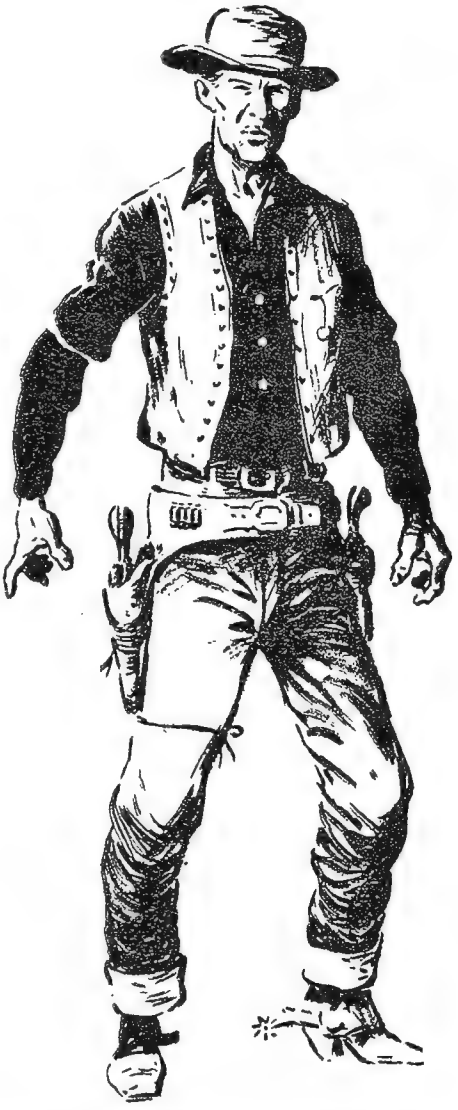
"You stay where y' are. You'll break your greaser neck."

"Si. You talked me out of it." He pointed with his cigarette and said. "There's the poet."

ALBERT Ridley had climbed the corral across from them. He looked more boyish than that first night. He'd be a big man someday, but he was developing late and still lacked coordination. He seemed ill at ease and apologetic. The boys had been shouting and laughing as the sorrel bucked around the corral, but now they fell silent.

"I feel sorry for the kid," Pecos said.

"Sorry? Ha! What fool talk is thees? Why would you feel sorry for a man who is due to inherit a cattle empire and perhaps marry the most beautiful girl in all the land? If you have sorrow, give some of eet to me, your friend who love you. Your Hernandez who is tail over teakettle in debt, a strange man in a strange land, without a pot to make coffee in or a window to throw it out of."



"My name's Garde. Maybe you heard of me."

The sorrel had come to a stop with flanks quivering, eyes wild, nostrils out. One of the cowboys, with a grin and a

wink to his companions, said, "How about it, Al? You like to rub a couple of spots off this sorrel?"

Everybody was watching Al Ridley then. He knew it. He seemed very lonely, there on the top rail.

Pecos said, "They'd like to get him killed."

"Eh? No chance. He'll not get on the horse."

"Want to bet?"

"Si! Here is where I reduce my debts to the tune of five thousand dollars. Five thousand he will never touch the hair of that horse."

Albert must have heard him. He moved suddenly, sliding down inside the corral. Anger clearly showed in the twitch of his lips.

"Yes, I'll try."

Nobody made a move. Now that he'd accepted, they were afraid of the consequences. They had contempt for the boy, but they all were a little bit afraid of his father.

Pecos swung over and jumped to the ground. "It's all right, boys," he said, ambling across. "Al, here, says he'll fork that bronc, and he'll do it."

The horse wrangler, a tall, tow-headed fellow about Al Ridley's age, had the sorrel by the hackamore and led him over to the fence. There the sorrel fought him, reared, tried to tramp him under his front feet. Finally, with the help of two other cowboys, he got the animal snubbed close to the fence with a big, cotton kerchief over his eyes for a blindfold.

Al Ridley hadn't said a word. Pecos, beside him, could see the tremble of the tense muscles around his lips.

"Scared?" Pecos asked.

"I'll get thrown. I'm no rider."

"Wrangler got thrown, too. So what the hell?"

"You'll lose your five thousand," Ridley said.

"I ain't got five thousand. Me or that Spik-Mick neither one. What's more we never will have as long as there's poker, whiskey and women in the territory. It's all I. O. U. Now you go ahead and fork that bronc."

The bronc, blindfolded, didn't realize the rider was there until he felt pressure in the stirrup. He ripped back and hammered his front hoofs against the corral poles. That gave him the purchase he needed, and he pulled away. The hackamore rope was dragging. Young Ridley was in the saddle, leaning forward, trying to get it.

"Whitey, hand him the rope!" somebody shouted, but Whitey, the wrangler, was on the run. Ridley got hold of it as the bronc shook off the blindfold, pivoted, and went squealing and sunfishing into the air. He lasted that jump and the next. A change in the animal's bucking tempo loosened him in the saddle. He was bucked over the horn. He had a handful of mane. One boot was out of the stirrup, one leg lower than the other. Next jump he was on the ground with the horse bucking over him.

The sorrel didn't step on him. He was a wild horse but not an outlaw. He bucked twice around the enclosure with his head down and stirrups a whopping. Al was up, trying to wipe manure dust out of his eyes.

"You got stacked, Ridley," the horse wrangler said.

One of the punchers said, "What in hell you crowin' about? You got your nose dug in the dirt, too."

Albert discovered he couldn't use his left arm. It was twisted, but not broken. Big Mike Coffey had just ridden in from Benton and was watching from his foreman's house. He called, "Better get him down here before his mother sees him."

"Sorry about the five thousand," Al said.

"Why, that still leaves about fifty-two thousand the Mex owes me."

CHAPTER NINE

Seeds of Suspicion

PECOS was outside, renewing his acquaintance with Mike Coffey, when a Chinese came and summoned him to the big house. He expected to be met by Jawn Ridley. Instead, the Chinese took him up some stairs, and inside a small sitting room. The shades were drawn and he was blind from the sun. The room had a closed in smell, an incense, sachet, funeral parlor smell.

He groped, got hold of a chair, and a woman said in a high, querulous voice. "No, don't sit down. Don't touch anything. I don't want to have my things soiled."

She seemed to be riding an emotional knife edge, threatening to slip and become hysterical.

The Chinese was gone, closing the door. Slowly the sunflicker left his eyes and he could see her. She wasn't young. She was thin, gray and tall. She was very pale, with spots of color in her cheeks. Once, perhaps, she'd been beautiful.

He bowed and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"I'm Mrs. Ridley."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What do you mean by making a laughing stock of my boy?"

"Did I, ma'am?"

She raised her voice until it was almost a scream, "Yes, you did! You made a fool of him in front of all those common hired men, and—"

"He didn't make a fool of himself, ma'am. He got on a bad horse and was thrown. He—"

"Don't interrupt me!" He thought for a second her anger would carry her into a convulsion. It frightened him. He was sweating. He wanted to escape. The air in the room seemed unclean, unfit to breathe. He forced himself to stand still and listen to her. "—you might as well admit it! It wasn't your idea to do that. It was *his. His!*"

"Whose, ma'am?"

"My—husband's! Jawn Ridley. He'd do anything to win him away from me. He'd even kill him. Yes, he would! I've heard him say so!"

"Ma'am!"

"My father—do you know who my father was? Colonel Marcus Burnside! He was with Jefferson Davis at the Southern White House in Montgomery. He used to be seated for dinner only two chairs from the president himself. Think of it, *the President!* And now look at me. In this awful place—hot and dusty and awful. In this wild country, surrounded by savages. Me and my baby!"

He stood and watched as she wept. Her shoulders poked up like spurs inside her ruffled, lacy dress. There was no meat on her frame at all.

"Ma'am," he said, wanting to do something, but there was nothing he could do. He took half a step and drew back.

She detected the sympathy in his tone and lifted her head. "Do you want to help me? *Do* you?"

"Ma'am—" He didn't know what to say.

"You'll have to help me escape. Yes, *escape*. He's keeping me prisoner here. I keep writing my relatives to come for me, but he destroys the letters."

"I'm sure he doesn't, ma'am. I'm sure you must be mistaken."

She screamed, "Yes, he does! Oh, he'd let *me* go. But I won't go without my boy. He wants to keep him here. He wants to make him marry that vile, shameless woman."

'Letty Stinchfield?"

Mrs. Ridley called the girl names. She called her things that should never have come from a woman's lips. Pecos tried to stop her. When he couldn't, he backed to the door. He opened it, stopped in the hall.

"Goodbye, ma'am."

PECOS closed the door. Jawn Ridley was at the head of the stairs. His face looked hollow beneath his high cheekbones and the big ridge of bone over his brow.

"What are you doing there?"

Pecos met his gaze and said, "Seh, she sent for me."

Ridley fought back the words he was about to speak. He took a very deep breath. Then he laughed bitterly. "Behold the Citadel! My happy home! My wife, a crazy invalid with a tongue like a drunken bawd. My son a coward."

"No, he's not a coward."

"You think not? You really think not?"

"I think not. There's only one thing wrong with the boy."

"What?"

"You, seh."

Ridley stood, still filling the stairway, looking into Pecos' eyes. He'd had a powerful grip on the balustrade. Now he noticed he'd torn a piece of it loose. He rammed it back into place and said in a husky voice. "I need a drink. Let's talk about this. You'll stay for supper. I tell you, there's no payment I wouldn't make if you made a man of that boy."

HE SAT at the table being served by a Chinese. The Chinese was swift and deft and silent. Quality of the food reminded him of the days long ago when he'd been on furlough in New Orleans. Overhead was a three-lamp chandelier with a thousand points of cut-glass glitter. It shone at cross-purpose with the sundown, giving the room a peculiar twilight.

Ridley was at the head of the table, eating, watching his son, watching Letty Stinchfield who'd ridden up during the late afternoon with her uncle, Dennis, a big, florid man in California trousers and a fancy shirt and vest.

It was Dennis who did the talking, expansive and extremely sure of himself after six trips to the brandy bottle.

"It's just a question of time before we have to uproot those nesters, Jawn. It's my considered judgement they're too cowardly to make the first move. No matter what you say, that'll be up to us."

Ridley said, "Dinner time, Dennis. Let's not bring up unpleasant subjects at the dinner table."

Pecos kept watching Letty Stinchfield. Her skin seemed unusually dark by the crosslight. His mind kept going over that scene at Trapper Springs. He didn't like to think of her in Jack Kansas' arms. He didn't like to think of her as the informer, either. He wondered if she was the reason Jawn Ridley changed the subject.

"How's your arm?" she asked Albert.

He was staring at his plate. "It's all right."

"I heard you tried to ride the sorrel."

"I got thrown." Albert looked over at Dennis and said, "What right do you have, or does anyone have, to shoot those nesters off the range? They're grabbing it like you did, and we did."

"See?" Jawn Ridley said, "Didn't I tell you we shouldn't talk about it at the dinner table?"

Afterward, Pecos sat over brandy and cigars with Ridley and Dennis Stinchfield.

Ridley, while in thoughtful scrutiny of the clarity of his drink said, "I've been informed, Dennis, that I shouldn't talk over our plans while anyone is listening, not even my son. Someone has been carrying our plans to the men down in Bull Sink."

Dennis cried, "Not Albert!"

"And not Letty. But it's just as well to be sure. By the way, Carris Garde was in Miles City eight or nine days ago, hiring men. At eighty a month." He said it significantly. Eighty was double a cowboy's wage, and meant only one thing—

gunmen. "He came back with four, and there'll be a couple more. I don't want too big an army, but I want it to be select. Carris Garde, The Pecos Kid, Hernandez Flanagan, Jim Swing, Curly Wolfe, Snake River Johnny, Tom Pierce—we'll handle the jobs that need to be done. I'm counting on you for half a dozen, Dennis."

"You'll get 'em."

Pecos asked softly, "What do you plan? Direct attack on Bull Sink?"

"To hell with Bull Sink! Burn it out, and it would spring up again before the ashes were cold. If you want to kill the tree, the thing to do is cut its roots. In this case, the source of revenue. Bull Sink's source lies up there on Bull Creek, Horn Creek, and the Sage."

"Those sodbusters? Oh, hell, Ridley, Bull Sink operates on horses. *Long* horses. Best I could get for rustled cows was a straight five dollars a head, and that was—"

"I wonder," Ridley said with a cold selection of words, "how far a Confederate major had to travel to make him love a bunch of damn yankees."

"I traveled a few miles, I did for a fact. For a good many of those miles I fought the wah over again. Then one mawnin' I woke up and noticed that the same sun was shining on all of us, Yankee and Reb, and that we all wanted the same things, and went about getting 'em in the same ways, good and bad. No, seh, you made a mistake if you brought me down here to fight the Wah of the Southern Confed'racy all over again."

"That mean you wouldn't kick a pack of lousy, range-chopping nesters off my grass?"

"I don't reckon, seh, I'd have much part in it." He stood up. "Sorry, Jawn. I guess it's all been a mistake. You should o' let us just ride on from Milk River to the Sweetgrass."

"Wait. You realize if you quit me now what kind of a light it would place me in? Back at the territorial capital they'd be saying, *Of course Ridley's in the wrong. The Pecos Kid wouldn't fight for him.*"

"Sorry, seh."

"What if I proved to you that *you* were wrong?—that those nesters under the Rutledge boys and old Gus Hyslop were in business branding my stock?"

"Why, that'd be another matter. I sure as hell would lump 'em with Kansas and the boys at the Sink."

"All right then, stay for a while. And sit down. Where do you get that vinegar temper? From Tully, your old brigade commander? There was a cavalryman—Tully! Let's have a drink to Tully."

CHAPTER TEN

The Wheels Start to Turn

DURING the late days of June half a dozen eighty-a-month punchers arrived from Miles City led by careless, hard-eyed Curly Wolfe. None of them worked. They lay all day in the shade of the bunkhouses, lighting cigarettes that always went out, and had to be lighted again, talking about women and horses, telling interminable lies about their adventures along the backtrail.

One of them, a heavy, dirty, whiskered man named Tom Pierce came home from the saloons at Ridley Landing in a bellicose mood one day, and after announcing that he was on the prod hankering to kill a Mex or an Indian, found himself in trouble with Hernandez who shattered first one of his arms and then the other as he went for his guns. Pecos heard the shooting and came running in time to apply a tourniquet to Pierce's left arm and save him from bleeding to death.

Pierce kept moaning, cursing, and saying, "I'll kill him, I'll kill him. Git my arms out o' these slings and I'll kill him."

Pecos said dryly, "Looks to me like you got out of it pretty lucky."

"I was drunk. Wait'll I get sober."

"When you're sober you won't have the guts. Soon as you're on your feet, I'd advise you to head back toward Miles."

Pecos walked from the hot shadow of the bunkhouse and met Carris Garde. Garde had been listening. He smiled with his loose mouth pulled to one side, an unpleasant smile that grated like sand in your food.

Pecos stopped and said, "Bad habit, you got, Carris—listening wherever you see an open window."

"Don't tell *me* what to do. I'm telling *you!*"

"Seh?"

"I went all the way to Miles for those men and I don't want 'em shot up when they get drunk and helpless."

"*You're* not drunk or helpless."

Men along the bunkhouse awning were tense, silent, waiting for his response, expecting a showdown. Carris wanted to save his pride, but he didn't want it to go too far. He swaggered, and made his habitual movement of hitching his trousers and gun belts. "I wouldn't get too ringy, Pecos."

"Why?"

"We both work for the same man."

Pecos laughed and said, "Yeah. You resented me ever since I first rode up here, haven't you?"

"I haven't resented you. You're just another gunman as far as I'm concerned, and so's the Spaniard. But I rode a long way to hire Pierce in there, and I don't want somebody gunning him out."

"Then tell him to stay. But I'll wager he won't."

Pecos walked around the corrals to a grove of cottonwoods guided by the soft music of a guitar. Hernondez had his back against a tree, hat over his eyes. He knew who it was without looking and asked, "He will live, Keed?"

"I guess. You better be careful. That's a mean crowd. A back-shootin' crowd."

"Then perhaps more bullets are needed."

"Just stay clear of 'em, that's all."

HERNANDEZ laid the guitar away with a movement of impatience. "For too long we have been in one place. Day after day—notheeng. Just sit, sit, sit in the shade, slap at flies, wear the fingers out on a guitar. Talking at the steamboat landing I heard of a great silver strike in Idaho. A boom town, like Butte, weeth money, money, money everywhere. In thees boom town, there is a music-house hotel four stories high, a skyscraper, filled to the roof weeth women. It would be much better than thees, no?"

"Sure, but we dealt ourselves a hand. We'll stay put a while."

"Eh-so." Hernandez heaved a deep sigh and laid back again. "What happened at that meeting last night?"

"What meeting?"

One eye appeared from beneath the hat. "Eh? You were not there, at the beeg house, with Jawn Ridley, that fancy Dennis Stinchfield, and Carris Garde? They talked behind your back?"

He thought it over and said, "They might have. I got a good nose, Butch, just like you. I been smelling something lately."

A week passed. Each day the Pecos Kid rode with Albert Ridley, getting the young fellow to talk, to tell about his troubles. He taught him things about riding, tracking and shooting.

One night he returned and found the shades of Ridley's office drawn, a light shining behind them, and a couple of Stinchfield horses tied in the shed adjoining the carriage house.

He walked around the back way, and stepped quietly to the porch. He stood still, listening. The heavy tone of Ridley's voice reached him but none of the words were audible. He started to go closer but

there was movement near him in the dark. He turned sharply and stood face to face with Letty Stinchfield. She'd been standing in the shadow of a porch pillar.

She said, "And *you're* the man who accused Carris Garde of eavesdropping!"

"We all do it."

She came towards him. Her head was tilted slightly to one side. She was trying to read his expression in the dark.

"Why have you been avoiding me?"

"You don't know when you're lucky." She'd started to put her hands on his shoulders, and he took hold of her wrists, stopping her. "Al is a nice kid. Why don't you marry him?"

"Maybe he's not my idea of a man."

"Who is your idea?"

She ran a soft hand across his shoulder. "Who do you suppose?"

"Maybe Jack Kansas."

She tensed. She stepped back. Her eyes had a trapped look.

"Why'd you say that?"

"I was at Trapper Springs one night. You told him about us, didn't you? Why'd you try to get us killed?"

"I didn't tell him about you! I didn't tell him anything."

"Looking for a stray horse?" he said laughing.

"No. No, I wasn't. I just get sick of things here. My uncle, my grandfather, all of them keeping me staked out for Al Ridley. A girl likes to have a fling of her own choosing. But I'm not a spy!"

"Who *has* been carrying information to them?"

She shrugged. "Carris, maybe. It doesn't make much difference *now.*"

"What do you mean, *now?*"

"Why don't you sleep in the daytime and stay awake at night? It might surprise you to find out who his visitors are." She backed off, shaking her head, her hand inside the bosom of her blouse. "Don't try to make me say any more. I still carry the derringer. I'll just add this, Mr. Pecos—why don't you go? Get out. Go where you came from. You're just window dressing for Ridley. He keeps you because of your reputation for fighting on the right side. But one of these days he won't need you any longer. So get out. Get out while you have the chance."

HE ATE supper with the Ridley's the next night, and found big Jawn to be jovial. Too jovial. Afterward Pecos climbed to Albert's room, rapped, and went inside, closing the door after him.

"Your dad's turned up some way of driving those Yankee homesteaders off the range, Al?"

Al suddenly had the shakes. Pecos knew how it was—he was scared of his father, but he considered Pecos his only real friend and wanted to tell the truth. It was cool, with a breeze blowing up from the river, but perspiration gathered in beads on his forehead.

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Pecos said, "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Yes, I'll tell you. Notice you haven't seen Mike Coffey around here lately? Dad's got him reopening the King Midas mine."

Pecos thought about it and shook his head. "I don't understand."

"He's freighted in a ten-stamp mill and steam engine. Do you know what he's going to grind and dump into the Big Sage? That King Midas vein. Only it's not really a vein, but a fumerole deposit—lime, and sulphur and lemon arsenic."

"Why, that'll be slow death to anything drinkin' the water. He'll run his head into territorial law."

Al laughed bitterly and said, "What'll those homesteaders do about it? Complain to Helena where the mining interests have all the power? They might as well complain to the King of England."

Pecos knew it was true. It would do them no more good than it did those ranchers on the Blackfoot who tried legally to prevent the big hydraulic outfits from covering their fields with placer tailings.

He said, "No more'n a third of 'em are settled along the Sage."

"Those fumerole deposits crop out for fifteen or eighteen miles. When he's through with the Sage he can move over the divide and dump them into the tributaries of the Horn."

"And he'll end up by killing his own cattle."

"Dad's sworn to run those Yankee homesteaders off the range, and he'll do it. He'll do it if it costs him every hoof he owns. You don't know my dad like—"

"Yeah, I reckon I do know what he's like. He'll win in spite of hell."

He saw Pecos getting ready to leave and looked scared, "Say, you won't tell—"

"Don't worry about me, Al. You did me a favor in telling me. I'll say nothing about how I found out."

"What are you going to do?"

"Only one thing I can do. I got to ride over to the Sage and talk compromise. You know what'll happen otherwise. They'll go to law about the tailings, and when that does no good they'll go for their guns. That'd mean range war. I been in on a couple o' those, and I never saw anybody win, the ones that started 'em, nor the ones that finished 'em."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Compromise or Else

STARTING at dawn, the Pecos Kid followed the southward trending valley of Ridley Creek until he sighted the yellowish scars of some prospecting dumps high along the ridge. It was a difficult climb through rock and timber, taking until noon. He found that the prospects were shallow and for some years abandoned, but the wind carried an odor of woodsmoke, and continuing to the crest of the ridge, he got a view of more impressive diggings, of tunnel entrances fronted by big cones of dumprock, of cabins and ore bins, of a shaft with an old horse whinch. The woodsmoke came from the chimney of a house a mile farther on where a fresh, pinkish scar ran horizontally along the hill. A large log mill building was about half completed. A trestle and chute ran downhill from the cut, terminating in a bin that from the distance, looked like a large, square chimney. Horses and wagons kept creeping up the newly dug road.

Thirst made him look longingly at the tributary of the Big Sage which flowed past the mill, but instead of riding towards it, he turned at right angles northeastward where, far off, he could see the angular reflections of ranch buildings. If his guess was right the place belonged to one of the Rutledge boys.

Traveling that way, it was late after-

noon before he reached the creek. There it had lost its cold clearness, and ran muddy and warm with green scummed banks and the mixed smells of mint and manure. He followed a wagon track past an irrigated field where corn stood high as a man's shoulders. A log house and some sheds came in sight through the box elder trees, and he could see a woman with a forearm shading her eyes watching his approach.

He dismounted to open a gate. A couple of hounds dashed up showing their teeth, but when he spoke they lost their ferocity and almost disjointed their rear ends with wagging.

He rode on, up the slight rise, across the hard beaten dirt of the farmyard. The woman was probably thirty-five, though she looked older. She'd been dried out and beat out by the country. She kept her right arm out of view, inside the door. She had a rifle or a shotgun in there.

"Hello, ma'am," he said, dismounting and taking his hat off. He had a good smile. He limped up on his horse-tired legs, fingering sweaty, brick-colored hair away from his forehead. "I'm almighty thirsty."

"That's a Ridley brand," she said, looking at his horse.

"Yes, ma'am. About me being thirsty—"

"You a Ridley rider?"

"Yes. I work for Ridley. I been yonder." He jerked his head back toward the ridge. "I been riding since mawnin' without water."

HE COULD see movement behind her in the house. A couple of kids were trying to see around her while she pushed them back. Then, through the hot air came a burst of galloping hoofs, and she jumped with relief. She came out, dragging with her an old-time percussion shotgun. "Harry!" she shouted to a man just as he came in sight around the sheds.

It was gangling, tall Harry Rutledge mounted bareback on a big-footed workhorse.

He reined in to a jog and came up with his right hand on the butt of the Colt strapped around his waist.

"You!" he said recognizing Pecos. "What do *you* want?"

"I'm here as a friend, Rutledge."

"Like you was homesteading that Parker place as a friend!"

"I wasn't there to harm you. I was just trying to find out what the deal was in Bull Sink."

He laughed with a bitter jerk of his head. He didn't dismount. His hands were clenched into fists that looked very large at the ends of his long, skinny arms. He was dressed in a faded patchwork of clothes. His bootheels were run over from following a plough, his sombrero was so old it had lost all semblance of its original shape, but rose to a cone at the crown, and hung in folds so he had to keep his head back in order to see. He kept looking this way and that, along the cutbank rims, and along the creek.

"I'm alone," Pecos said.

"Maybe you are and maybe you're not. What you here looking for?"

"One thing would be a drink of water."

"Well, you just crossed the crick."

"That's not my idea of drinking water. Seh, in this country you don't even refuse water to your worst enemy."

"I ain't refusin' it. What d'you think *we* drink? Think we got a icewater spring like up at the Citadel?"

"I'm sorry, seh. I thought—"

"We got some settlings in the barrel," he muttered grudgingly. "Git him a dipperful, Maude."

Maude brought it to him. The dipper was cool, but the water still had the cattle smell of the creek. He wondered why they'd never sunk a seepage well, only he supposed that would require at least a small cash outlay, and an outfit like this wouldn't see fifty dollars a year.

"Thanks, ma'am," he said with careful courtesy. He looked from one of them to the other, and at the kids inside. There were three, all boys, dressed in the sun-bleached, cast-off rags of their father. The oldest was about eleven. Somewhere he'd picked up a pair of boots that fit him. They were tallowed black, and some rough, rawhide soles had been pegged on, but that didn't save the sides which were ruptured letting his toes leak out.

"Hello, button," Pecos said, but the kid didn't answer him. He put his hat back on. He didn't know how to start. Then he laughed and said, "Well, you folks wouldn't believe me if I said there was four sides to a barn, but this is it—you and Ridley been making it pretty tough on each other—"

"We make it tough an Ridley? Him and his big house, and his shiny carriage, and his fancy steppin' horses—"

"No-o, now hold on. He's spread out from here to yonder, I'll admit. But he won't have anything but the Medicine Ridge if you homesteaders keep fencing the water. You've fenced a whole site of it more'n you need, just like he grabbed more of the range than he needs. Upshot will be that each of you will keep pushing the other a little bit farther until all hell'll bust out. I came here on my own to advise you to try and get together—compromise a little."

"In what way?"

"Talk Harry Layne into taking down that reservoir dam he built that holds back the Little Sage. Make some cattle crossings on Horn Creek. Lot of those fences are built around nothing, just to push Ridley stock off the water. That's dog in the manger attitude, seh."

THE WOMAN cried, "You got a lot of nerve talking to us about dogs in the manger when Ridley's forced the big steamboat outfits to refuse shipment even when they need our spuds and truck the worst way down at Benton and the minin' camps."

"Maude!" her husband said. "Let's listen to him."

"Excuse me, ma'am. I been trying to say it works both ways, and you both suffer. And maybe you'll suffer the most. Ridley's just started."

"If he tries to come down on *us* with his gunmen he'll find—"

"He'll not do that." He pointed toward the Medicine Ridge. "You ride yonder, *'way* yonder, where that long ridge with the jacktimber on it runs out south from the peak—"

"The Crowsnest?"

"You go yonder. See what's doing. He's putting the old King Midas mine into operation. Got a stampin' mill that'll grind rock like flour. When he's caught the gold he'll run those tailings into the Big Sage. They ain't ordinary tails. They got a couple percent of lemon arsenic, besides sulphur, lime and iron oxide. They'll yellow the bank, and kill the fish, and stink like sulphur smoke. Try to irrigate with it and your crops will shrivel up and die."

She said, "You can't scare us."

"I ain't trying to. Ma'am, I got nothing to win. No matter who wins, I'll end up without a friend in the country. I got a pal hankering for Idaho, and I'm getting a hanker for it, too. It's just that I dealt myself a hand in a bad game, and now I don't know any way of getting out of it. I'm here tryin' my best to help you and Ridley both."

"He can't poison a stream. There's a law preventin' such a thing," Rutledge said.

"Sure. Down in black and white. In the territorial books, to be enforced by a bunch of millionaires in Helena, men that got rich out of Butte Hill and Last Chance. You think those big mining men would ever tell a gold mine to shut down because it contaminated a rancher's water supply?

And even if the law did side with you how long would it take?" He kept talking in an easy voice. He hunkered, picked a wire-stiff spear of buffalo grass, and picked at his teeth with it. "You think it over. Talk it over with the others. I'll drop back in—"

"You don't need to!" Rutledge got down and hitched up his gun belt. "I'll give you your answer right now. You go back and tell Ridley we don't scare. He can threaten what he wants to. We're here legal, and we're here to stay."

"Sorry." Pecos got up and limped back to his horse, still trying to kick the fatigue of riding from his legs. "I wish you'd think it over. I sure *do* wish you'd think it over."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Guns Aflame!

A WEEK later, at the Citadel, four representatives of the Horn Creek Land Owners Association rode up—they were the Rutledge brothers, Gus Hyslop, and a spare, rooster-necked man named Cassman.

Pecos walked to meet them. They were still by the gate, wary of trouble, although none of Ridley's eighty-a-month cowboys had so much as changed his sprawled position in the shade.

"You talked compromise," Harry Rutledge said. "Are you still talking it?"

"Seh, it's not up to me. Jawn Ridley's at the big house, though. You come yonder. No, you don't need to be wary. No matter what you think about Ridley, he's a Southern gentleman, and you're his guests. He'd kill any man that was even impolite while you're at his place."

Ridley had been watching from the front window, but he pretended to be taken by surprise. He had contempt for these hoemen, anger that Pecos had brought them to his house, but he hid both, ordered the Chinese boy to bring whiskey, offered them cigars. Then he listened with a big-boned set to his jaw while Harry Rutledge told him what they'd come for.

He laughed bitterly and said, "You fence off my water, hog my range, and now you want to close down my mine!"

"We're here to compromise," Gus Hyslop said in his mild way.

"Then you have something to offer. What is it?"

"There's only a couple good homesteads on Horn Creek. We'll buy 'em out. Make room for 'em on the Sage. We'll stop damning the water and take down every fence that's not needed to protect our crops. We'll acknowledge the range is yours if you'll acknowledge the bottoms belong to us. What we've claimed, that is. We'll do that if you close the gold mill, and let us trade at the Landing." Then he dropped a bombshell. "We already sent a message to Judge Sturgis in at Benton. Everybody knows he's fair and square. We'll abide by whatever he says. We asked him to come to Ridley Landing to arbitrate."

Ridley didn't speak for a few seconds, but Pecos knew how he felt by the savage way he bit into his cigar. He doubled his fists. His muscles thickened, tightening the shirt across his arms and shoulders.

Gus said, "You trust Judge Sturgis, don't you?"

"Yes, I trust Sturgis. He's the most respected man in the Territory. A man who wouldn't trust Sturgis wouldn't trust anybody. If he'll come, I'll abide by anything he says."

TEN DAYS later a special messenger arrived at Ridley Landing from the telegraph station at Fort Wells. Judge Sturgis was leaving for St. Louis on the steamboat Dakota, the last one downstream before low water ended river transportation for the season. However, as the Dakota would stop at the Landing to take aboard

wood and freight, the Judge would be willing to meet representatives of both factions in his stateroom. The date set by Sturgis was four days away, giving time to summon the farmers from Bull Creek, and representatives of the 76 and the J bar E far over by the Big Dry.

Wagons started rolling into Ridley Landing the afternoon before. About Sundown, the Pecos Kid rode in with Al Ridley. He grinned at sight of the farmer wagons gathered in a circle around a cookfire.

"Like they expected a visit from Blackfeet!"

"Or from us Ridleys!" Al said, and he didn't smile.

"I notice you been worried about something."

"There'll be trouble."

"I doubt it. Judge Sturgis carries too much weight. Even for your dad. Nobody'd better start slingin' lead when Sturgis is around. He'd turn that steamboat around and go back for the army."

They found every one of the Landing's keg and tincup saloons filled with punchers who'd ridden in with the representatives of the 76 and the J bar E. More men kept arriving during the night, and the morning hours. The homesteaders stayed in their camp on the flats of the Big Muddy, while cattle outfits occupied the town. Only the little general store and one saloon at the lower end of town saw a mixture of both factions.

There was considerable drinking, but little noise The men were holding their liquor. As the morning passed, a crowd accumulated down on the steamboat dock.

The river had dropped considerably during the past ten days. Off toward the middle some mudbanks had appeared just above the surface.

Old Gus Hyslop, half strangled by a hard collar, limped up in bull-dog toed shoes and said to Pecos, "That river looks mighty low. I'd hate to take so much as a rowboat down at this time of year."

"The Dakota draws only three feet of water. They'll get it down, all right."

Noon passed, and the hot hours of afternoon. The Dakota was many hours overdue. Only a few remained on the dock. There was a meeting among the homestead wagons, and speculation in the saloons. The rumor had gone around that the Dakota would not arrive—that Ridley had given orders to the steamboat company *not to let it arrive.*

PECOS had just stepped inside the Elkhorn Saloon when two gunshots, one close on the other hammered the hot afternoon air. He turned and moved quickly back outside. Men were already running toward the general store. Someone was down in the shadow of the platform. There was a rig just beyond that had been loading supplies.

Shooting had frightened the horses and they were trying to fight their way from the hitchrack. He recognized the team and buckboard. They belonged to Harry Rutledge.

A man on horseback swung briefly into view behind the store and was off at a gallop. Even from two hundred yards, through the shifting heat-glitter of afternoon, Pecos recognized him as Carris Garde.

He ran down the street. The quick-gathering crowd blocked him from the store platform. Big Jim Swing towered above the others. He was near the fallen man, trying to push the crowd back.

"Make room, damn it, make room!"

"Jim!" He recognized Pecos' voice and looked. "Jim, what happened?"

"That damned Carris Garde! He came up and caught Rutledge putting grub in the wagon. Started a row. Drew and shot him. This will let all hell loose." A tall, spare man with a goatee stood up. Jim asked, "What is it, Doc?"

"He's dead. Died instantly." He got

"You are trying to break up the love affairs of Hernandez one time to many."

himself to the platform and looked over the crowd. "Has this man any relatives here?"

One of the Stinchfield riders back of Pecos said, "That's a hell of a note. He's got a wife and three kids."

It took a few minutes for the news to spread through the homesteader's camp. By that time Rutledge's body had been moved to the shed back of the store. The crowd broke away, and the town seemed quiet. Then, walking in a tight group, with rifles, shotguns and six shooters ready, the homesteaders came up the street.

The Doc, after some prodding, stepped out on the store platform and called, "What you aiming to do?"

Gus Hyslop took a couple of steps in front, spat tobacco juice, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and said, "We want that killer, Carris Garde."

"The law'll take care of him."

He cried, *"We'll* take care of him, or we'll shoot this town apart."

Men of the ranch crowd stood under the awnings all along the street, listening. It was so quiet Gus Hyslop's words bounded in echoes from the cutbanks back of town.

Somebody said, "He already cleared out."

The Stinchfield cowboy back of Pecos said, "He did like hell. That yellow gutted bushwhacker hid himself inside Long John's barn."

The barn he mentioned sat slightly back from the main street, on a knoll. The homesteaders started that way and were met by a volley of gunfire.

Shooting suddenly burst from a dozen other directions. One of the homesteaders went down and two others dragged him to cover. On the instant, scarcely anyone was left in sight. Men were down behind sidewalks, between buildings. There was a hornet's nest of rifle fire behind some broken wagons and old iron heaped at the side of the blacksmith shop.

Caught from two sides, the homesteaders retreated. Pecos and Big Jim found themselves trapped with Hyslop, Fred Rutledge, and a couple other homesteaders against the west wall of the general store.

BULLETS ripped in from a saloon across the street. Some gunmen from the Stinchfield ranch had placed themselves there. Pecos crawled, came to a crouch. The leader of the Stinchfield gunmen showed himself in the door. They saw each other at the same instant. Pecos' bullet was a fraction of time ahead, knocking the man down like he'd been hit by a sledge.

"That's one o' the dirty killers," Hyslop said behind him. "Here, lemme up beside you with this scattergun."

Rutledge said, "They're outside, the back way." Through clenched teeth he was trying to fight back his emotions. "I'll get one of 'em! I'll get one for Harry!"

He fired and missed, and missed again. He had an old rimfire Henry, so shot out there was neither rifling nor accuracy left in the barrel.

The main group of homesteaders had now retreated to a ditch that made a natural fortification just below town. Bullets whipped back and forth, raising riffles of dust in the street. One of Ridley's eighty-a-month punchers was down, shot through the mouth, and two companions kept shouting through cupped hands for the Doc, but he was inside the store and refused to show himself.

Pecos and Jim had moved around to the rear of the store. It was there Hernandez found them.

"What, senors? You cower like two old squaws? What keeps you here? Is it the sound of lead bullets or the jingle of gold money you hope to be paid from the purse of that scoundrel, Jawn Ridley? I for one am seek of the whole business."

Pecos said, "Idaho's a fine place, Butch, but we got a few things to wind up first."

"Who talks of Idaho? Come, senors! I need a slight bit of help to march upon that stable and put bullets through the steenking insides of Carris Garde."

"No, Butch. You light for a while. You—"

"Is thees the Pecos who outdrew Querno and Alderdice, both at the same time? Is thees the Pecos Keed I was proud to have for amigo because he said *to hell weeth danger* and rode in the teeth of feefty guns through the hot dust of Guadalupe? Has thees northern air chilled your blood? Have you been drinking the milk of the jackrabbit?"

"I sometimes take pride in shootin' one o' them Sam Colt things, but I also got a hanker to stay alive. Doing one and the other both at the same time requires a certain time and a certain place. That time and place ain't now. You bide a while, Butch. And don't think too hard about Carris Garde. We'll give him a day or two."

"Senor, weeth or weethout you, Hernandez Pedro Gonzales y Fuente Jesus Maria Flanagan will—"

"Get down!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Time for a Showdown

IT HAD ended when evening settled. Pecos, Big Jim and Hernandez rode along a buffalo trail through the back country hills. They covered a mile without speaking. Then Hernandez asked:

"Where to, Keed?"

"I been thinkin' about it. Ridley ain't through yet. He won't let it stand half done."

"You theenk this judge, Sturgis, is also in the pants pocket of Ridley to be taken out and danced on a string whenever—"

"No. If that was the case, the judge would have got here. Ridley saw to it he *didn't*, and saw to it that all hell broke loose so nobody could ever get those homesteaders in to talk compromise again. But he still hasn't won. In some ways, Ridley's worse off now than he was before. He's a smart man, and a merciless man. He'll strike again and strike hard, before that G.A.R. bunch in Helena takes a hand."

"If we returned to the Citadel—"

"We're through there. We'd better ride yonder to Rutledge's. I reckon he'd be alive tonight if it hadn't been for me."

Big Jim said, "You can't look at it that way, Kid!"

"I never been one to shirk my responsibility. And there's three ragged kids out there that's part of *my* responsibility."

SEVEN wagons were drawn up at the Rutledge place when they arrived just before dawn. Gus Hyslop plodded out, still in his bulldog shoes, a shotgun in his hands.

"We'll go if you tell us to," Pecos said.

"No. I guess it weren't your fault. We talked it all over. Ain't a man here that thinks it was your doing. You come in if you'd like to. There's some coffee on the stove."

"I want to see Mis' Rutledge. I got to tell her how I feel."

It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He came outside afterward, feeling sick and sweaty.

Hyslop said, "You look like you needed something stronger'n coffee." He pointed and squinted eastward. "Riders comin'. I guess we'll have a big funeral."

It was Cassman and the two Duckett boys from the Little Sage. They carried news of a rustler raid the evening before, and their places had been swept clean of stock—work horses, broncs, milk cows, everything.

Tears glistened in Cassman's eyes as he talked. "That Daisy cow o' mine, you know what they did? Run her over a cutbank and broke her leg. Left her lyin' there. I had to shoot her. Best cow ever in the country."

Later, word came from Horn Creek that the raid extended even there. The Bull Sink gang had swept the country, timing it for the hours when everyone was camped at Ridley Landing.

They buried Harry Rutledge about noon. Afterward the men held a powwow down near the creek which each day ran more yellow from the tailings of the King Midas mine. They talked of riding against Bull

Sink, against the Citadel, against the mine. Nothing was decided. Instead, they split into four groups to ride from farm to farm and gather additional men.

That was about two o'clock. Pecos agreed to stay on at Rutledge's until Layne could drive back over with his wife and family.

"It's best not to leave the woman alone just yet," Layne, a short, pinkish gray, freckled man said. "You don't mind?"

Pecos said, "I'll do anything I can." After Layne drove off in his battered, rawhided wagon, he went in through the low doorway and looked at Maude Rutledge who, like a sleepwalker, was working around her kitchen. He turned his hat around in his hands and spoke. "Ma'am, you're left in a bad way with three kids."

"We'll make out." She sounded beat-out and tired.

"I got a little money. It's yonder." He tilted his head at the Citadel. It was more than a *little* money. It was the thousand in gold Ridley had given them. "I'll fetch it. It'll tide you over."

"I'm lookin' for no charity."

"You can owe it to me. I'll take a mortgage. That all right?"

"I suppose. I don't know—I suppose."

He went back outside. Mortgage! The whole place, chattels and all, wouldn't be worth four hundred. He'd get her name on the mortgage and tear it up.

He sat with Hernandez and Big Jim through the hot hours watching the yellowish creek flow past. The yellow had already crept up the bank, killing out grass and horse mint. Mrs. Rutledge prepared supper for them. Taste of the yellow was in everything—in the coffee, the food she cooked. Night settled, and there was a jingle of harness links as Layne drove back with his wife and two kids.

"We'll go now," Pecos said.

"You leavin' the country?"

"Not for a while yet."

Mrs. Rutledge saw him leaving and ran from inside. She grabbed the latigo on his saddle and said, "I *will* give you a mortgage. How much you think you could lend me?"

He looked far off, narrow eyed, like a banker. They'd spent considerable money in at the Landing, but Big Jim still had greenbacks sewed in his underwear from Miles City. "I'd say a thousand dollars, even. You sit tight. We'll bring it."

A MILE from the ranch, Hernandez pulled his horse around and said, "Lone rider." He pointed with the glowing end of his cigarette. "In the willow brush, skirting it. I saw heem very plain. He seems to be following us."

"Stay here!" Pecos rode over alone. He kept his right hand upraised in the Indian signal of friendship, pulled up at long range, and called, "Hey, yonder!"

The answer was soft, but he could hear it across the night silence. "Keep coming!"

It was Letty Stinchfield. He should have been surprised but he wasn't. He'd had a hunch.

She sat her horse very straight, both hands clutching the horn, waiting for him to come up. "You don't think any of *that* was my fault!"

It took him a moment to understand she was referring to the business at the Landing. "No, o' course not."

"If I'd known—if I *had* known!—"

"Sure, Letty. You'd have told me. It was pretty rough. He had three kids."

She moved her horse over. He could feel her knee against his. She reached and had hold of his shirt a second before her horse turned and pulled them apart.

"Pecos! I lied to you once. I *did* tell Kansas you were a spy. I'm sorry now, after I saw how he played the game."

"You mean the raid last night?"

"Yes! I never cared for him. It was just—"

She couldn't find the right words and he said, "Sure, gal, I understand. It's all wa-

ter over the falls. We got to start out from *now*. You came to tell me something else, didn't you?"

"They're going to attack the mine?" She tilted her head, indicating the homesteaders over by the Big and Little Sage.

"I don't know."

"You still don't trust me!"

"Hold on. That's the truth. I *don't* know."

"Well, they *are*. Ridley had men trailing them, watching through field glasses. This evening they headed down the road toward Threesleep, and swung west at Ross coulee toward the mine. Now he's getting ready to ambush them. I ran my horse all the way. I thought if I couldn't find you I'd head over and warn them myself."

"You think Ridley's already on his way?"

"Not yet. He had to bring some of his men up from the Landing."

"Al tell you all this?"

"Yes. He'd have come, only his dad has men watching—"

He took hold of her arm. "You like the kid, don't you?"

"I don't know. You wouldn't understand. He needs me."

"Sure. That's a good thing about women. A good woman will go to the man that needs her."

He kissed her. "That's goodbye," he said, and driving his spurs, set off at a gallop.

"Pecos—" she cried, but he didn't slow or look back.

He didn't stop for Hernandez and Big Jim. He motioned and they galloped after him. After a mile, Hernandez drew close enough to say, "What the hell? You wish to keel your horse, senor?"

He shouted over his shoulder, "Those dumb Yankees have it in mind to attack the mine, and Ridley knows it. Maybe we get to the Citadel we can talk him out of layin' a deadfall."

"*Talk*, Keed? I have had enough of talk!"

Pecos slapped his gun and cried, "Enough of *this* kind of talk?"

"Ha, now you are the Pecos Keed of old. No, of that Colt music I have heard too leetle!"

THE country steepened. They passed through scrub pine and juniper, down a shallow wash, around a rock point. There they could see the valley of Ridley Creek, with the home ranch and the Citadel below. By the cut-across route it had been a scant six miles from the Sage.

Pecos drew up and let his horse breathe. "Still there," he said, his voice showing relief. "See yonder? Heap o' men by that lighted-up house."

Hernandez cursed under his breath. "My guitar is in that bunkhouse. You do not theenk—"

"Don't worry about that damned guitar. Worry about the nine-fifty in gold coin I hid under my bunk."

They rode straight down to the corrals. Broncs were galloping in a circle, and men were trying in the dark to get ropes on them. Over the running and shouting no one paid the slightest attention.

"Hadn't we better walk from here, Kid?" Big Jim asked, sounding short of breath from excitement.

"I'm enough of a cowboy to have contempt for walking. I aim to ride up yonder like a Southern gentlemen."

They circled the corrals. A cowboy riding down from the bunkhouse peered at them through the dark—peered and kept peering but didn't speak. They dropped out of sight, splashed across the shallow creek, and emerged again.

Lamps and candles burned in the houses. The whole place was awake and busy.

Big Jim kept wiping sweat off his face. Hernandez, seeing him, laughed with music in his voice and said, "Save some of your sweat. I theenk it will get much hotter."

Jim whispered, "You ain't figuring on riding straight up to the big house! There'll be men ten deep around there."

Pecos said, "Looks to me like they're ten deep all over."

There was an area of darkness between the ranch and the grounds of the Citadel. They climbed a steep pitch, followed the winding carriage path through shrubs and trees.

Jim, still wiping sweat off his vast face, whispered, "I didn't like the way that cowboy looked at us down by the corral. Rode by without speaking. Ain't natural. He suspected something."

"Señor, have I ever told you about the time in Chihuahua when I was in love weeth the daughter of a bandido chief who had keeled the last five men who tried—"

"No, and I don't want to hear it. Keep still, damn it! Hear that? There's somebody a-galloping."

"Listen about thees woman, the bandido's daughter—starting from the ground she was like thees, and then she came out like thees, then like thees a man could put two hands around her waist, and then—"

"Hold it, Butch," Pecos said. "They *are* gallopin' this way."

The hoofs made a sudden clatter in the dark behind and below. By the sound they split in two groups. They were still coming, but a little more slowly, circling the grounds.

A man called, "Carris!" It was Curly Wolfe, leader of those eighty-a-month gunhands.

Carris Garde answered from the region of the front porch. "What's wrong?"

"You got visitors coming up through the yard."

His voice sounded on edge, "What do you mean?"

"It's Pecos and his pals, that's what I mean."

Pecos said under his breath. "We get off here."

Jim whispered, "You *still* going on to the house?"

"I aim to pay Jawn Ridley a visit."

PECOS walked on, letting the bridle drag. Without looking around he knew that Hernandez and Big Jim were following. He fingered cartridges from the loops of his belt, and put them in his pocket where they'd be easier to get hold of. It was very quiet now. His boots crunched loudly on the gravel path.

He could see the front of the house, its porch, veranda, and big bay windows. He stopped. Somewhere a horse stumbled, a man cursed. Men were running around the house. He took another step, moonlight fell on him, a man jumped to the concealment of a porch pillar and fired.

The bullet carried a sting of powder as it winged past his cheek. He shot back while going for cover.

Suddenly they were in a crossfire. They crawled through bushes, across a stretch of lawn to a rock garden of agate boulders where a fountain trickled, and Alpine plants were in bloom.

Hernandez had shot his six-gun dry. He lay in the cover of rocks, reloading. "Keed!" he whispered. "Is thees Southern hospitality I have heard you speak so highly of? Keed, where are you?"

"I'm here, and you stay there."

He slid over the rocks. He was in the open for an instant. A slug dug the earth, beat one side of his face with stinging fragments.

Carris Garde shouted, "Curly. Get somebody by the east road in case they make a run for it."

Pecos smiled through his teeth. It hadn't occurred to them that they wouldn't try to escape.

He kept moving through the bushes. He was only steps away from the porch.

A man grunted, lunged from the shadow, fell. He was wounded. Other men tried to pull him back.

Pecos, lying flat, used his elbows to drag himself across open ground. Shrubbery by the porch hid him. He was so close he could hear the wounded man grunt from pain. Gunsmoke and the stench of gunsmoke drifted over him.

The porch was above him. He got hold of some latticework, pulled himself over the rail.

He rested on one knee, got his bearings. The big porch half circled the house. He moved along, past lighted windows, found a side door, opened it, and lightly stepped inside.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Job Well Done

IT WAS quite dark there. It seemed close and hot. The stale smell of cigars touched his nostrils. Gunfire sounded heavy, drumlike through the walls.

He walked down a short length of hall. A door led to the big sitting room. Light shone beneath it. As his hand touched the knob, the light went out.

He opened the door, stepped inside. The large outlines of the room were revealed by a slit of lamplight coming from the front entrance hall.

"Carris!" It was Ridley. He was seven or eight steps away, in the middle of the room. He bellowed, "Carris!"

Carris Garde answered from out front, "Yeah, I'm here."

"Where are they now?"

"Still back of the rock pile."

"Smoke them out of there. If they're still alive, bring them in. I want a few words with that Pecos Kid." He laughed and added, "A few last words!"

Pecos walked on. He had a vague impression of Ridley's position. He didn't draw, but he was conscious of the weight of his gun.

He said, "If you want to talk with me, Jawn, here I am."

His voice hit Ridley as though it had physical force. He spun. His breath came in a grunt of surprise. There was a shine of gunmetal, flame and explosion.

Pecos had been on the move. The bullet whipped the air beside him. His own gun roared. The door to the front entry which had been three or four inches ajar, now flew fully open. Silhouetted was Carris Garde with a gun in each hand.

He saw Pecos at the same instant. His guns blazed, but he'd shot too quickly. He'd made the mistake of not freezing his target. He tried to thumb the hammers and fire again, but his time had run out.

PECOS hit him with bullet lead. The three hundred grain slug knocked him backward. He hung with his back to the door casing and his legs thrust stiffly out. He fired into the floor. He tried to move and his legs folded under him. His body struck the floor a heavy, dead weight.

Pecos kept going. He exchanged shots with Ridley. Gunsmoke blinded him. His gun was empty. He grabbed cartridges and tried to reload. Suddenly Ridley loomed in front of him. He had time to thrust the man's gun up as it exploded. They reeled across the room, collided with the table.

He was no match for Ridley's strength. The man ripped free, with the same movement he flung him to the floor.

Ridley covered him and pulled the trigger, but the hammer fell with an empty *click*.

He cursed and swung out with the barrel. He'd aimed at Pecos' head, but movement in the smoky halflight made the blow miss. It struck with paralyzing force where the neck and shoulder joined.

Instead of following it up, Ridley started reloading his gun. His muscles were heavy, his veins seemed to flow molten lead. He managed to clinch, and keep the gun muzzle away from him. He held on desperately, getting the lead weight of paralysis out of his muscles, as Ridley dragged him

across the room. A chair was under foot. Ridley trampled it to disjointed rungs and kicked it away from him.

Strength was flowing back through Pecos' body. He had his sense of balance again. He was able to think and move.

He knew by the tension of Ridley's muscles that he was preparing a massive effort to hurl him away. He let go of his own accord. It took Ridley by surprise. It made him take a step to regain his balance. Pecos, pivoting, brought up a right hand blow with all the strength of his legs, and back and arm behind it.

It caught Ridley at the apex of its power. It snapped his head as though he'd hit the end of a hangman's noose. The gun flew from his fingers. He reeled, hit the table, rebounded. Now it was Ridley who needed to grapple. Pecos took a step back, set his feet, and smashed him to the floor.

He got up and ran headlong into a right and left. He staggered against the wall. He was staring and slack jawed. The next blow dropped him on his back with his arms wide.

Still he managed to roll over, drag himself to his knees. His eyes were out of focus. His mouth drooped open and blood ran from the corners. His lips formed words.

"No! Don't hit me again."

Pecos stepped back and got a deep breath. "All right, Ridley. Call your men. Tell 'em the ambush is off."

He nodded. He got to his feet, tripped, fell headlong, and got up again. He reached the window. He called to them, but the shooting still went on. He smashed the pane with his fist. He shouted. "Curly! Mike! That's enough. Get back—to the bunkhouse."

The shooting slowly came to a stop. He turned around. He took a couple of steps. The rug had been wrinkled. His toe caught and he fell. One outstretched hand reached his fallen gun. He grabbed, twisted over, came to a crouch.

THERE were twin explosions—his gun and one outside the window, and the one from outside was a second ahead.

It knocked him forward and made his bullet fly wild. He lay face down, still working his arms, trying to get his gun, trying to rise.

Hernandez, walking across the porch, said, "Senor Keed, I did not keel heem. But I nicked him very good. Where is that backshooter, Carris Garde?"

"There, on the floor."

"You have shot heem already? Senor, thees is a dirty way to treat me, the amigo of your heart!"

"Call to Jim! Get him in here before one of those gunhands take a notion to shoot him in the back."

"Here I am, Kid!"

"Come here. Help me lift Ridley to the couch. Butch, pull the shades and get the lamps lit. We'll have to get his bleeding stopped."

The bullet had struck a bone and glanced upward, missing the spine.

Pecos said, "You'll never come closer to killing a man than that, Butch."

"I never so wanted to keel a man without doing it. You know why I did not? Because his back was turned. But if he had been facing me—" He shrugged and pointed to the wound. "That bullet I theenk shattered a vertebra. He will be months in bed with that. A year?—who knows?"

Later on they found Al Ridley locked in a room upstairs. Al said, "He found out I'd sent Letty away to warn you about the ambush. He was mad enough to kill me. Threatened to kill me. I guess I'm lucky."

"He won't be too tough to handle for a while," Pecos said.

"Will he live?"

"He'll live."

"I want him to live. I want him to live and be proud of me. I'll take care of him. I'll run the place. I'll square things with

(Continued on page 113)

Tarat began his stealthy encirclement.

The Fanged Buccaneer

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Tarat, the cunning wolverine, would be wilderness devil indeed if he could escape that carefully laid, fool-proof trap, which would tempt Satan himself!

TARAT, the big male wolverine, was not so big physically. Yet in all the wilderness there was no creature which dared challenge his right to the preemption of a kill.

Squat, built low to the ground, his great paws were well armed with sharp claws, oversized, out of all proportion to his gen-

eral size. His weight would not go above forty pounds at the outside.

Tarat, the evil one—Tarat, the skunk-bear. Many were his well-applied nicknames. Yet he was a handsome heller of the wild places, his coat a beautiful side-striped and cowled chocolate brown.

Tarat was aging, but he had lost none of his amazing cunning or killing power. He shuffled on toward the northeast through the brush and timber, toward the outer fringe of the timberline.

He roamed afar, a severe thorn in the sides of trappers, hunters and prospectors, and a grave menace to the mothers of youngling creatures, the fawns of caribou and deer.

Because of his habit of continuous exercise, Tarat was everlastingly hungry. This evening, as he grimaced evilly, he had the tang of a food supply in his sensitive nostrils. Close to the edge of the Barrens, where the brush and timber ends, there still lingered a small herd of caribou.

THE HERD of Otok, the caribou chieftain, had not yet bedded down. They had come upon a brush-fringed swale of thick, sweet grass, with which they intended to fill their paunches against the long trek on to the lichen-covered tundra.

Otok, a handsome buck, shook his head, a head crowned by a pygmy forest of glorious antlers. The big buck was uneasy. Every now and then he tossed up his muzzle and sniffed sharply, his eyes blazing. A dread scent seemed to come from many quarters.

Tarat had begun his grim encirclement of the area, now and then giving out faint sprays of his noisome stench, from which habit he had gained the name, "skunk-bear."

Cunningly he tightened his circle, sensing by the blowing and snorting of the caribou creatures, that he had them disturbed, perplexed. His evil eyes now gleamed through a port in the scrub brush. Three bucks and adult cows had their backs to him. Tarat now had the wind in his favor, and was determined to make the most of this advantage.

For long moments, without seeming to move, he exercised his powerful muscles, rolling them, flexing them. His strong claws had dug down through the light snow, into the turf, where they clung securely as he strained against them, one of the many exercises which kept this buccaneer hellion of the north always in the peak of good fighting condition.

Now he started to weave forward, his flat body low to the ground. He looked not unlike a small, flat bear.

Ahead, lying down apart from the adult members of the small caribou band was a fawn, of this year's get. The youngling blinked into the starlight, disturbed by her sire's uneasiness as Otok continued to mince choppily about the farther edge of the swale.

His head lowered, Tarat grimaced, exposing his sharp fangs. He subsided to the snow, to wait with infinite patience—another of his virtues.

SLOWLY now, he raised his head. Otok had come to a halt. The big buck grunteded reassuringly, for his nostrils were at last free of the stench of his great enemy. Frosted night wind had carried the danger scent away.

The other bulls and cows and standing young stock moved up to flank Otok. He led them on through a brush fringe, into a second small swale.

The bedded fawn worked her jaws and then gaped wearily. There was no alarm given. She was content to stretch her lower jaw forward, and subside into a doze.

Tarat began to creep, to circle, or half circle, his intended prey. He must not give the fawn his scent. One sharp blat of alarm, might bring the bucks wheeling to attack. Their force of numbers could cheat Tarat of his kill.

He swayed and weaved closer to the youngling caribou, then manifested his speed and timing. A short blat was instantly strangled, as those deadly fangs struck fiercely and deep.

But the attack had not been executed without sound. Tarat wheeled, his chops drooling bloodied saliva. Led by Otok, the adult caribou came threshing back. Otok came skidding to a halt, his large eyes now charged with glowing red lights of anger, anger tinged by fear.

An old doe gave out a hollow throat sound, a deep guttural, as she swept on past Otok's flank to attack. This was a challenge to the king buck. Head down, he rushed.

Tarat whipped his lithe form clear, then raked the big buck's muzzle with a set of roweling foreclaws that sent Otok back on his haunches.

The caribou now pressed forward in a half circle, bobbing their antlered heads. Tarat reared his head and clacked his strong jaws in defiance. Then, he suddenly whipped about his kill, giving off his noxious, nauseating sprays of skunk-like stench. It was his means of protecting a kill.

Otok coughed and bawled while Tarat backed off, into the denser brush from whence he had come. He bellied down and muttered some chattering throat sounds as he elected to wait out the caribou herd's next action. He had made his kill, and though his empty belly grumbled for food, he was content in the realization that before very long, he would be feasting with much tearing, gulping, belching.

This night was his! He had matched his cunning and his striking power against even the great antlers of Otok. Tarat's eyes blinked. Then he stretched himself and dozed.

TARAT'S short ears cocked as sounds of breaking brush told him that Otok was driving his herd away. Then the buccaneer hellion clacked his strong teeth, as a hated stench reached him. It was the tang of timber wolf, and it blended strongly with the scent of his kill.

He scuffled forward toward the swale, but came to a sharp halt as he heard the rip and tear of plundering fangs. A young, hungry she-wolf was in, a creature which had been attracted by the scent of the caribou. She was an inexperienced waifling, or else she would have hesitated at the strong, foul tang of Tarat's scent.

Tarat rose to his hind quarters, his piercing eyes catching the actions of the young wolf. He watched her rip out caribou flesh and gulp it.

Now he peeled his lips back across his teeth, and crouched low as he began to creep around the brush fringe. Shortly, he raised his head, his eyes gleaming with almost hypnotic force. The she wolf had seen! Her dripping jaws gaped.

Slowly, Tarat crept forward, his head never wavering a fraction of an inch, as he held his enemy transfixed in that terror-producing stare.

Suddenly, as if still prompted by hunger, the she-wolf found a source of courage. This creeping striped one was of no great size. Besides, he was squat, flat of shape. He could not have her speed.

Tarat made no headlong rush. He turned off right and began his stealthy encirclement. The wolf turned with him, her hackles rising. Now and then she poised herself to attack, but the slowly-moving creature of death swung in to tighten his circle, shift position, with scarcely any perceptible change of speed or motion.

Slowly, surely, her spark of courage faded. She quivered with a tightening fear that set her lean form quivering.

Tarat was in close now. An adult fighting wolf might have done one of two things: he could have rushed, and taken his chances with death or a terrible mauling, or—he could have whirled and loped off to safety.

The youngling she-wolf was unable to choose either alternative. She was frozen, and the evil one was bunching to leap. Yet strangely enough it was not Tarat who killed her.

With a sudden flirt of his sinuous body, he whipped to one side, seeking cover, snarling bitter hatred, just before a crack of sharp thunder dropped the wolf in her tracks.

Tarat had picked up the strong tang of man scent. Man and his flame and thunder! Man and his deadly, cleverly-concealed traps, whose snapping jaws Tarat had more than once felt on the claws of a hind foot.

Tarat's body quivered with fierce hatred as the man scent strengthened. He was boiling with a sense of frustration. Three times tonight, he had been molested at the moment of a feast.

Now he heard the muffled man-made voice sounds as he watched the tall form move in on the caribou and wolf kills.

OLD Case Daly swore bitterly, as he sneezed the definite tang of wolverine from his nostrils. Of all creatures in the wilds he hated and hoped to kill, Tarat, the wolverine, and his kind, were top of the list.

Never before had he come so close to such a kill as this evening, with a half moon to give him all the light he wanted for sighting, close in.

Tarat, the hellion, who had robbed his traps and caches, was back again on Daly's timber-fringe trapline zone.

The man grunted disgustedly as he rolled the wolf over. "Not worth peltin'," he said sourly. He glared down at the tracks in the snow, and lifted his gaze toward the brush belt into which his enemy had vanished.

A slow grin widened his mouth and wrinkled his whisker-stubbled face. His teeth suddenly clicked.

"Okay, y'danged hellion!" he said huskily. "We'll play it out your way. I got time, plenty of time. I'll git you, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Daly chuckled throatily as he broke brush, and stuck it into the snow beside the caribou carcass. He peeled off his parka and tied this to the brush. It carried his scent, a warning indeed to Tarat—a blockade if he returned to his kill.

The night was not cold. Daly had a sweater on and it would keep him warm enough as he shuffled off on his snowshoes to his camp for axe and supplies with which to establish a temporary camp here.

As he bent head down into the wind, he made his plans. He would, if necessary, circle the entire area with skilfully set traps, well baited with the most delectable morsels of meat, tinged with sweet-scented oils, such as he'd use later for lynx back in the timbered areas.

In the covert, Tarat reared his head, pricking his short ears to catch the sounds of snowshoes on the dry snow. He grimaced and clacked his teeth. Not for some time did he leave cover and when he did, he scouted the zone carefully, in wide circles, mincing in over every foot of snow-covered ground as if expecting every second to hear the deadly snap of steel.

There were no traps, but as he turned in toward the kill, he quivered. He snarled gutturally as he glimpsed that effigy of a man creature, that blowing parka on the willows.

Tarat advanced a step or two, sniffing sharply. He exposed himself fully, ready in an instant to whip about and race for cover. But there was no sign of life in that strange, man-like thing, only a lingering tang of the man scent whose danger sign decreased as Tarat's full courage returned.

As he moved in closer, the big wolverine's anger mounted. Ordinarily sour of temper, his wrath now brought foam to his champing jaws. Suddenly he rushed and struck the blowing cloth thing. He

clamped on a firm hold, jerked his strong neck and the thing was down, a dead thing, a helpless thing which presented no menace.

Tarat turned and dragged the shapeless effigy into the brush where, like a demon gone berserk, he ripped it to shreds, tossing the fragments from his teeth with snarls of distate and disdain.

When he was done, he swaggered a moment or so, spraying some of the large cuttings of cloth and fur cowl with his stench. Now he moved swiftly in on his kill.

Snarling, he drove his fangs sharply into a flank, burrowed his muzzle deep into the entrails and began to suck and enjoy the succulence.

Shortly, his powerful jaws had, with effective surgery, skilfully cut the most of a hind quarter of the fawn. Now Tarat demonstrated his great strength, an amazing strength in a creature his size. He raised the weight of meat and bone, approximating his own total weight and, head high, moved on into the bush.

Save for a brief moment's rest now and then when he coiled to sniff into wind, he didn't pause to rest in two miles of travel, travel which took him into a tangled mass of twisted windfall timber, upturned spruce roots, and pitfall holes which he often used as a hideout, or bedground.

Here, in this dismal swamp zone, a place well suited to his evil character, he went to work, to feast. Small creatures of the swamp, weasels and the like, lifted heads timorously, but Tarat's snarls sent them scuttling to cover.

Overhead, in a tamarack whose limbs reached out like a stark skeleton, a snowy owl glared down at his old nemesis of the wild hunt trails. His large eyes glowed like two coals—coals burning with the fires of savagery for he was in his own right a terrible killer.

On silent wings, Oskoos, the owl, banked down, and circled, hoping to dart in and snatch a morsel of the meat. His wings scarcely made as much sound as the sighing of the night breeze, yet Tarat suddenly whirled and stretched, and only the good timing of the owl saved him from more injury than the loss of a few leg feathers as he whirled up.

Tarat stood, his forepaws on his kill, his face now a hideous mask as he gave out his snarled warnings and screeches. They were sounds faintly heard by the man creature, back at the remnants of the caribou carcass.

DALY stomped back and forth, roaring his curses into the northern night. He flailed his arms, raised his rifle and shook it when he discovered his tattered, useless parka.

"Dirty, sneaking hellion carcajou!" he roared. "Could come in an' steal the canned milk out of a trapper's tea, right before his ver' eyes!"

Off in the distance, as though in sharp mockery, a timber wolf wailed. Daly shuddered. His lips framed the word, "Varmints!"

Yet, Daly, wise in the ways of the wild folk, realized that it was from such "varmints" that he eked out a livelihood and, now and then, made some good money.

At this moment, though, one pelt, one particular pelt, would have come as a bonanza—worth ten times the value of a good catch of lynx. One pelt—the pelt of the buccaneer hellion Tarat. To rid a trapline of but one wolverine was as good an investment as any trapper could have made.

Daly spat contemptuously. Steam puffed from his nostrils in twin jets as his breathing became harder, so he reached sharp decision. He would forego his trapping for a time. The lynx in the timber would keep, he told himself. He had the rights to this trapline, and would pick up its marten later on in the season.

His slow grin returned, as he turned in the direction Tarat had taken. It was to

be a battle of wits, a battle to the end, and straightway the veteran of the north traplines set to work with axe to fashion an ingenious box trap.

He would ocnstruct his trap of poles, setting out many steel traps, carefully concealed, within the "corral" walls. These traps would be carefully baited with the remnants of the caribou carcass.

As he sweated and steamed, Daly retained his grin. He had other plans, at least one other cunning plan. He would hound the carcajou, keep to his trail, force him to give up feeding—all in the one main scheme to force Tarat to return to his former, big kill.

It took the trapper two days to complete his trap building. As he stood back to survey it, he was not conscious that a pair of evil eyes watched him from cover.

Tarat had stolen in, the wind in his favor. His belly was not empty; there were still scraps of the part quarter of venison back in the timber, but the wolverine was fired with a strong sense of possession, and of an innate curiosity. It was a curiosity that seldom got him into trouble but which often was the means of his survival. He scouted out his enemies, pointed their location.

There were sweet, tantalizing scents being wafted to him now and his belly grumbled and growled as if in protest at his inaction.

Tarat, however, had the wisdom, the instinctive sense of the man creature's power. Wisely he snuggled down to watch and wait, and not for some time after the man had moved away did the wily carcajou venture from cover.

Those scents! They were new, inviting. Tarat clacked his teeth as he crept, belly-down, toward the trap area.

At the entrance to the pole gateway, he paused and sniffed. He suddenly coiled on his stern and began to move with great caution around the outside.

His intuition was uncanny, but then he was Tarat, the king wolverine, most cunning of all the predators.

Man, however, was not without cunning. In spite of Tarat's great wisdom and care, there was a sudden sharp snap, a searing pain in Tarat's near side hind claws.

He whirled, snarling. He was caught! The man, with much knowledge of the habits of the wolverine, had craftily laid a string of traps around the outside of the main trap.

Now Tarat ceased his snarls, as if he was aware that his enemy might be within hearing range. Never had he looked more evil as when he lunged against the vice on his claws. It hurt, but Tarat had been hurt before, in those same claws.

Now he turned and wriggled back, rooting in the snow with his muzzle along the trap chain. Again the man had shown his cunning. Ordinarily the trap chain would have been stapled to a drag log, but old Daly had known a wolverine to pick up a heavy drag log and carry it miles. He had stapled the chain to one of the stout aspen poles which formed the walls of the box trap.

TARAT sat and blinked. He now began to champ his powerful jaws as though exercising them, preparatory to putting them into swift actioin. If the man creature had made one mistake in his careful planning, it was in his use of green poplar timber.

Tarat turned, snarling gutturally, and fanged the pole. Chips and slivers flew. He spat the acrid taste of poplar from his mouth. Slivers cut his lips, but only served to intensify his anger and hatred. He ground and chewed and tore.

Now he turned and moved to the other side of the staple where he resumed his fanging.

The night closed in and now and then as he paused to lick his bleeding lips, Tarat blinked skyward, grimacing evilly at the glinting stars which seemed to glare down

at him in such silent condemnation.

Off in the distance, a timber wolf gave out its high-pitched wail. An answer came from another point. Tarat's back muscles rippled. The pack of Achuk, the wolf, was gathering to run the white hunt trail.

These sounds spurred the big wolverine to further action. He worked with fury, ignoring the cuts and stabs in his mouth and lips.

Now he backed away, turned, and dragged his trap to the first cutting. Shortly he seized the inside of the badly chewed pole and stiffened his neck muscles. With all his strength he heaved back. There was a tearing, grinding sound and then a snap. The pole was severed.

Shortly, a three-foot length of pole dragging, Tarat moved on, stumbling, limping into a grove.

Suddenly, there was a sharp tug at his trapped claw. He whirled, snarling, then set himself. He strained forward, but the draglog held. It was caught between two standing poplars.

He backed up, quivering with mixed emotions, then with a sharp snarl, he threw his whole weight into a terrific spring that propelled him six feet forward. At his back, in the tight jaws of the trap there remained two of his hind claws.

Coiling, he caught up his paw in his mouth, sucked it, as he guttured his curses. He made strange whimpering sounds—strange coming from him. Now he thrust his paw deep into the snow and held it solidly down until the bleeding was stanched, and much of the pain had gone.

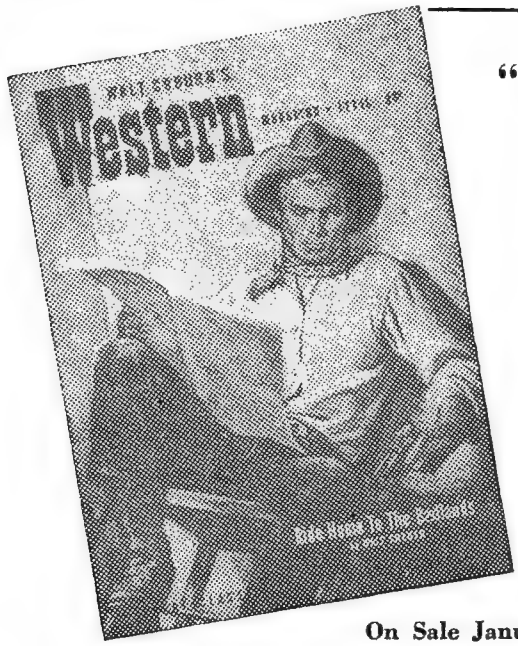
IT WAS close to dawn when Tarat limped back toward the trap area. Doughty, undaunted by his recent grim experience, prodded by an unquenchable sense of his own power, he drew on all his keen senses as he approached the nearly fateful steel trap site.

Again he set his powerful jaw muscles into action. Already there was an aperture through which he could have squeezed his body, but Tarat had bigger designs.

Now with the full freedom of his well-muscled body, he set himself to work and within an hour had torn out another green pole.

Gently, he let himself into the interior of the trap proper. Putting his keen sense of smell to its sharpest use, he began to

(Continued on page 107)



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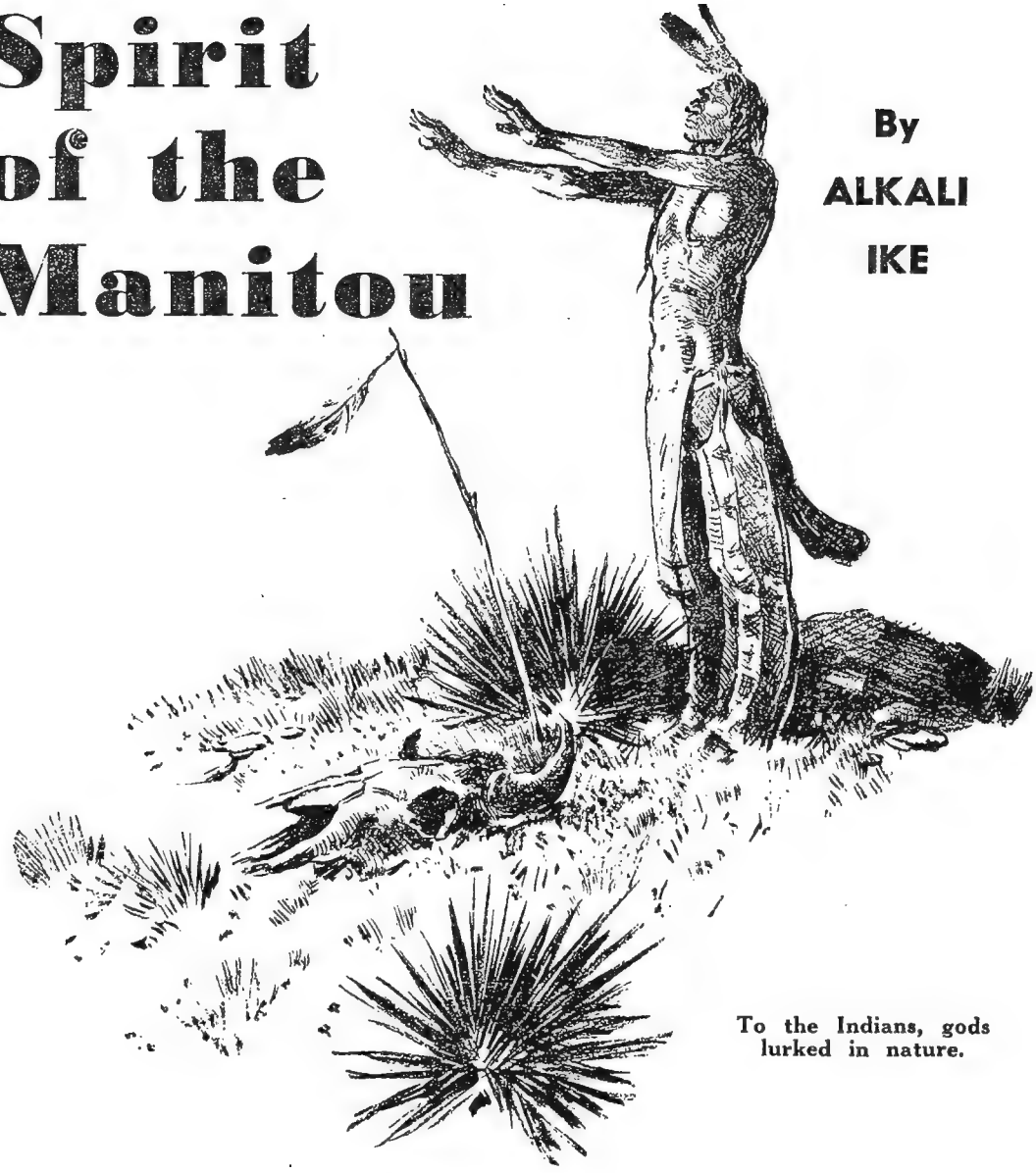


To the Indians, gods lurked in nature.

IN THE old days Indians wasn't exactly thought of as bein' religious, but now that we can look back and second guess, we can see that their way of looking at things was pretty far advanced.

To the Cheyenne, the Sioux, and the Blackfoot; to the 'Pache, the Crow, and the Comanche; the world was a sort of stage where unseen gods played their parts. The mysteries of nature were a source of constant wonderment to the Indians—because they knew their lives depended on ol' Lady Nature's whims.

Knowin' how he felt about nature, it's easy to see why all of the Indian's religion —in fact, most of his beliefs—were based on nature.

Many a stalwart brave has heard the voices of the gods in the wind, rain, and thunder. The migrations of the buff'lo herds was a wondrous miracle, and even the growin' of corn was so important that there was special prayers for the plantin' and harvestin'.

Ridin' herd over the whole kaboodle was the supreme god Manabus. Every

Indian, North or South America, knew about him, though he was often called by other handles like Manitou, Manibozho, Wakan Tanka, and so on. All wise and all powerful, this top chief was, and in many ways he was like the Great Spirit of our own Gospel. Fact is, the legend about how Manabus created the world is mighty close to the account of the story of Noah's Ark.

It seems that Manabus had many enemies with powers near as great as his, and bein' jealous of him, they up and flooded the world. Only way Manabus could re-create it was by gettin' some mud from the bottom of the ocean. So havin' this in mind, he sent down four diving animals, like the beaver and otter. Three of 'em failed, but the fourth critter brought up the mud—and the new world was born.

Just like in the Bible, Indian legend says that Manabus created everything that lives on earth and handed down rules and directions for living, so if you was to ask an old Indian why Indians did such-and-so, he'd likely answer, "Manabus made it so." And 'cordin' to his lights, that was that. There was no arguin' with Manabus.

A lot of sky-pilots who went out into the plains and hills intendin' to convert the "heathen" Indian was mighty impressed by the Indian's story of the flood. Right off they tried to use it to prove the truth of the Gospel, but the Indians thought the story of Noah's Ark just proved their own version.

Near everybody that's ever heard the word "Indian" has heard of "totem" too, but not everyone knows 'sactly what it means. Most Indians had one—symbolized sometimes by a "totem pole" and sometimes by a medicine bag. Totem was the key to their whole way of looking at things. It meant a brotherhood of all men, animals, and birds, and a guardian spirit watchin' over each and every brave.

Among the Sioux, for instance, no self respectin' Indian could live without a guardian spirit. If he tried, he would have bad luck. His enemies would defeat him and the wild game would run from him when he hunted. So naturally every Sioux warrior made it a special point to get a guardian spirit, and the gettin' developed into a real complicated ceremony.

Long about the time an Indian was nearly through bein' a boy and startin' to be a man, he got ready for his "vision quest." First, he purified himself with prayer and counsel from his elders, which included the medicine men. While he was doin' this, the squaws would build a sweat lodge which was a frame hut covered with skins that worked about the same way as a Swedish steam bath. When he was through with his prayer and meditation, the brave would sit in this till he got good and steamed up, and then he'd take a runnin' jump into an ice-cold stream. Then he was ready for the next part, the vision quest itself.

IT WAS thought that every Indian would meet his guardian spirit (in the form of an animal or bird) in some quiet, lonely spot where there was nothin' but nature. So the spot he picked was usually on top of a hill.

Here he'd meditate and offer prayers to the great spirit for days on end. Food and water was in easy reach, but he wouldn't touch any of it till he'd had his vision.

After a few days of this he'd receive his vision and go back to hunt up the medicine man and find out what it meant. (It was pretty secret stuff, what seein' each animal or bird meant.) They had a different lodge or cult for every animal or bird, so if he'd seen a deer, he'd join the Deer Cult, gettin' in on all their secrets, ceremonies, and stag parties. Sort of like the modern day fraternal lodges, like the Elk, Moose, Eagles, and them.

'Course all this ritual varied some from

(Continued on page 110)

By
ROBERT L.
TRIMNELL

Longhorn

A trail-hand's disposition gets considerably soured, riding drag on a dusty cattle-drive. So it was up to one little old flea-bitten hound to try to make a hand on that long, perilous Longhorn-trek to far-off Montana.

IT SEEMED to Pete Winters that the trail from Texas to Montana was built through a long gray tunnel. Every week or so the tunnel seemed to roll across a river, and at fifty-mile intervals a tree loomed up out of the dust.

One thing, if he ever got back to Texas, he was going to tell the Baptist preacher a thing or two. The preacher thought hell was all fire and brimstone. He didn't know about the gray dust mushrooming up from seven thousand plodding hoofs, stirred by seventeen hundred and fifty switching tails, perfumed by enough grassy breath to suffocate an army. And how the dust was livened up by three or four million flies, gnats, blue ticks, locusts, and grasshoppers. Even the contagious fleas headquartered on the boss's dog, Chihuahua, seemed to thrive better in the dust. And for Satan, this gray hell had the herd's owner and trail boss, Charley Green.

He called it Hell's Gray Corner, his spot on drag, at the tail and dust side of the herd. He meant to suggest the title to the preacher, when he got back to Texas.

That is, if he weren't hanged by then.

He gave that only a passing thought. Karp's plan was too simple to go wrong. Matter of fact, even if Charley Green or any of his other drivers caught them in the act—why, there was no act to be caught in!

THE DAY Charley Green shot the antelope was one of the worst. They were crossing a strip of red earth country. That would have been something for the preacher to see, Pete thought. The sun was the bottom of a copper kettle beginning to melt and drop in boiling splashes through a burning bronze haze. The haze kept all the heat inside the dust tunnel, but offered no shade. It was finer dust than they'd had before. It didn't stuff up your nose; just waited and got into your lungs, then made you erupt mud like an irrigation pump.

Pete hadn't the least idea where they were. How could you know when you rode Hell's Gray Corner? He assumed they were entering the Nations, the way Karp was keeping his eyes peeled. Must be out of Texas—Texas was never like this.

Karp had already eaten and came out to take the drag for him at about five o'clock. Karp was a stoop-shouldered man with a straggly, graying beard and a falling belly. He gave Pete a slow wink of his drooping right eye.

"Seen anything?"

Pete pursed his cracked lips and made a long, rattling, burp sound.

"Yeah. Well, guess it'll have to be me keeps lookin' for them. Okay. Good chow—antelope that Green shot.

Pete nodded and kneed his horse around toward where Karp had waved a greasy thumb. A half hour out for grub, then keep 'em moving until eight o'clock. Then three whole hours' sleep until his turn to night herd. After that almost an hour and a half of sleep before the day started again!

Charley Green was just too soft, that's

Dynamite

Karp raised his gun to strike.

all. According to the preacher, the Old Nick would likely keep you busy a good half hour a day longer. And Charley paid you well. Why, in fifty trips like this, say three months each, you'd make almost as much money as Charley did on one!

That was pretty generous of Charley, Pete thought. And it was just bad luck the Texas beans had worms in 'em. Not that Charley got them cheaper that way. Oh, no, not Charley!

And antelope for supper. Charley had gone and wasted a three-cent Winchester cartridge, just so his eleven hands could have a change of grub. They didn't come any better than Charley. Even the Baptist minister said, "I never seen Charley Green leave less than a dime on the collection plate!"

Pete wasn't much in the mood for fun when he rode up to the chuck wagon.

Joe Atley was. Being Charley's foreman and part-partner, he naturally rode point, ahead of the dust. And now he was full of antelope steak and the least wormy frijoles. He was drinking coffee and smoking a twist of good, black, Mex Lobo. Joe Atley didn't hurt too much at all.

As the figure of Pete and his horse became visible through the dust to the west of the chuck wagon, Joe told Pancho the cook, "Hey Pac', let's put that last prong-horn leg in the wagon and slide the bean pot ahind that mesquite. Won't hurt Pete none to give him a laugh."

Pancho grinned quickly, used to cowboy-style jokes. He caught up the remains of the antelope, still spitted over the fire, and slid it into the chuck wagon. He got a hook and hauled the big bean pot out of sight.

THERE were only the two of them there, besides Charley Green catching a quick doze squatted against a wagon wheel. Charley heard them and smiled.

"Might not hurt Pete to remind him this ain't his daddy's ranch," he murmured. "Fact, his daddy's been hopin' the trail'd knock some of the smart out of him." Green's wide hands hung loose over his knees. To all intents and purposes he was asleep again, except that a cold, half-burned cigarette was still held by two fingers.

Pete went over to the water barrel before greeting them. There he dunked his face, gulped water, spat mud. He came out of it wiping mud off his face with his shirt sleeve. He looked at the sleeve. A sticky mixture of red and gray. It had been about mid-morning when they came into the strip of red dirt.

As he walked up toward where Joe Atley squatted, he spat and drawled out one word.

"Hey-yell!"

Joe laughed and Pancho grinned broadly as he scraped all the remaining beans and bones from the chow tins into a pan. Chihuahua, Charley's hound, wagged his tail hopefully until the pan was set down and then he plunged his muzzle into it.

Joe said, "Pac', you damn fool! I tole you Pete hadn't et yet. There you go throwin' Pete's share to Chihuahua! And just think how delicious that antelope steak was, and how careful you picked over the frijoles to throw out the wormy ones!"

Pete's square face parted and his jaw dragged it down into a long, open rectangle. He looked at Joe, sipping his coffee. At Pancho, staring down at Chihuahua. At the dog, his muzzle buried in the pan of beans and antelope refuse.

"Pobrecito Pedro," Pancho said sadly. "I forget everybody hasn't eat yet."

The first thing that came to Pete's mind, he spouted. "This way it's cheaper for Charley, eh? Gyp somebody out of his grub each chow time and you save ten percent on what you pay for wormy beans!"

Charley Green's broad face was a leather mask. Dead-asleep against the wagon wheel, as far as anybody could tell.

Joe Atley got to his feet and walked solemnly over to Chihuahua, grabbed the braided rope that was the dog's collar, and

picked up the pan. He turned and walked back to Pete, his face solidly serious.

"Here, Pete. I know it ain't much, but hell, a feller gets awmighty hungry spendin' twenty five hours a day in the saddle. Go 'head. Chihuahua warn't hongry enough to eat it all anyhow."

Pete was still stunned. He looked at the mess in the pan, looked at Atley's earnest face. Joe was some four feet away. Pete took one step forward and kicked.

Beans splattered up into Atley's face and mashed the cigarette into his mouth. A flying bone knocked his hat back, and descending beans plastered his bald head. The pan rattled tinnily to the ground.

When his foot came down Pete kept moving, brought his right fist up from underneath, and squinted one eye to sight the point of Atley's jaw. He missed exact center, but two rawboned knuckles took it to the side. Atley was off balance already. He went over and landed in a sprawling heap.

Pete didn't go after him. Just stood there, legs wide apart, fists clenched, shoving his wide bony jaw down at Joe Atley.

Atley climbed slowly to his feet. He rubbed his jaw and gave Pete a sour look. Green was awake. He said, "Pete, it was just a joke."

Pancho hurried to the chuck wagon and hauled out the antelope leg. *"Si, un chiste,* Pedro."

Pete ate his dinner in glum silence.

WHEN Pete was done eating, Charlie Green came out of his doze and lit the half-burned cigarette. Carefully, so he wouldn't singe his bushy grey mustaches. He scratched under his three-week beard where it itched. Everybody had a beard, since they'd hit no town for nearly a month. Charley fixed his hard black eyes on Pete.

"Pete, I ain't exactly sure you're happy with us."

Pete made a lip sound like ripping cloth, meant to affirm Charley's dour opinion.

"I know it gets dusty a mite, over there, Pete. But we got to put the tenderfoot on left drag. The old hands earned better spots."

"Tenderfoot! Me that forked a hoss when I was four and roped dogies when I was eight?" Pete shouted.

Charley grunted, "Tenderfoot. The trail ain't yore daddy's ranch."

"Not by a damn sight, it ain't," Pete spat.

Charley shrugged. "You're gettin' trail hand pay—"

"Trail hand pay! As much in a month as you get out of it in an hour!"

"Then make up your own damn trail herd!" Charley stood up and turned away toward the remuda, but stopped. "Pete, you can cuss me all you want and gripe and shout. Only one thing. You took my pay and you're bound to stick it out."

"Why in hell should I—"

Charley cut him off with a look. He scratched under his beard. "I dunno why. But you got to, that's all. I sure can't run you on a lead rope. But you got to."

He strode off toward the remuda.

CHIHUAHUA came over and tried to climb on top of Pete. He tried to lick his ears, but the dust spoiled it for him, and he was content to sit close to Pete and share his fleas.

"Chihuahua, how'd you like to dive into the irrigation tank to home?"

Pancho said, "Chihuahua ees not like the water."

"Stupid fool!" Pete shouted into the dog's face. He got up and remounted his horse. The dog followed him. It was with him a lot these days, though sometimes it got lazy and climbed into the chuck to ride a while. But often it followed his horse, and if a cow got ornery and decided it was fed up with the rest of the herd, lots of times Chihuahua nipped its hocks until it lumbered back into line, and Pete didn't

have to chase it. Other times it would scramble up into the saddle and sit there in front of Pete. Then if a cow got ideas, often enough the hound would refuse to have anything to do with it, being more interested maybe in licking Pete's ears.

One thing, the dog was smart. Never jumped down off Pete's horse where the cows could see it and get excited. As careful as any of them that way, seeming to understand the general idea behind not lighting matches, not dismounting in sight of the cows, and so on, things that might scare the herd into stampede.

Through the dust, Pete saw Karp riding in his place at drag, easing along the sore-footed, and cows heavy with calf or with calves alongside. Pete spat. He didn't love Karp any more than he did Charley Green or Joe Atley. The whole gang was dirty now, unshaven, and trigger tempered. The trail was hard. But Karp was that way all the time. Foul-mouthed in front of ladies and always starting a saloon brawl with somebody not cut up to his measure.

But Karp was his partner now. Together they hated Charley Green, and hatred is better than most things to bind men together.

"I figure about tomorrow we ought to see 'em," Karp said, whispering hoarsely. "There'll be two signal fires on top of a bluff towards dark. Just little fires. I figger you won't see 'em likely, but you can't tell. Wind might shift to west."

"Fat chance," Pete grumbled. "Never seen it yet."

"Anyhow, I'll stay close here, and the one sees it, tell the other. Then when it gets dark I'll head off and tell 'em where to cut in." He paused and held up an unlighted cigarette. "Still got fire?"

Pete gave him his cigarette. Sometimes you could light a match inside your hat, but you had to be careful, and smart at it besides. The cows would spook awful easy, after the long weeks of trail they'd put in. That was what Karp's friends figured. They'd just ease in and cut out maybe three, four hundred head. Each would have a blanket across his saddle. If the cows didn't turn easy, one would have a blanket. If Green or anybody happened to see what was going on, they'd snap the blankets and stampede the herd. But that was the last resort, for the plan was to move out the cows so quietly nobody'd miss them.

A couple days up the trail Charley might get suspicious and make a count. By then it would be all over. Nobody to blame, and Karp and Pete would each have a pair of hundred-dollar bills tucked down in his boots. That much for just saying nothing when the longloopers moved in. All they had to say if Charley asked, was that they'd seen nobody. Dust, the darkness of night, the muffled roar of seven thousand hoofs—you could easily miss a bunch of raiders, or else mistake them for your own gang.

Who the longloopers were, Karp hadn't said. Pete assumed they were outlaws, holed up in the Nations. He didn't care. All he wanted was a share in the profits on the herd, and this was the only way he could think to get more than his miserable wages. Besides, it would hurt Charley Green, and he was all for that.

"Keep that damn hound away from here," Karp said, handing back Pete's cigarette. "He won't cotton to strangers comin' around."

"He won't bother them. Reckon he likes me better'n Green anyhow."

Karp laughed and kicked his horse on up ahead. But Pete figured it was true. Chihuahua would always leave Charley to come over and lick Pete's ears. The dog came when Charley called, true enough. But it was Pete he really liked.

NOW of all the damnfool crazy notions for weather to take! After three weeks of Hell's Gray Corner, the wind shifted, and while the horse floated along in a gray dust billow, Pete's face at least was clear above it. Matter of fact, it was Joe Atley,

up on the right point, that got it worst. Pete could now see a cottonwood-lined stream off in the distance and a hill that was somewhat green, and way beyond, the rise of purple mountains.

Chihuahua liked it and spent most of the day riding Pete's saddle. Finally Pete got tired of the fleas and pitched him off. Besides, he was busy watching for smoke, and Chihuahua's gaping mouth was always in the way. When, toward evening, he saw a slow spiral of smoke rise up on a hill, he knew that was it. The second smoke came later.

Up ahead he saw Karp wave to him, then cut off away from the herd down into a coulee. After that he couldn't see the man at all, until he returned an hour later.

Nobody else had seen Karp leave. The herd was too big, too spread out, and they'd think nothing of it anyway.

As usual, Karp ate supper first, then came to relieve Pete while he went in. He rode up close and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, his shifty eyes roving over the hills to the left.

" 'Bout an hour after dark. Four of 'em. Keep a cigarette lit and wave it up and down when you see 'em, if it's all right to come in. If it ain't, wave it sideways."

Pete nodded and rode on toward the chuck wagon.

Charley Green was squatted down against the wagon wheel. "Pete," he called, from under his floppy hat brim, "Best take your gun along tonight." He lifted the brim and saw that Pete wore his .44 Colt flapping on his thigh. "Oh. Well, I saw some smoke up on a bluff today when I was out knocking fool hens down with my rifle barrel. Since there's nobody here in the Nations but Injuns and crooks givin' the law a chance to forget 'em—"

"You think it's Injuns?" Pete said as he squatted down next to the fire.

"Naw. The signal smokes they made was too big. Likely some boys the law been givin' a hard time. But no shootin', now. You know what gunshots would do to the herd. They're near spooked as it is, them clouds buildin' up over east."

"No shootin'?" Pete said. "Okay. Don't strike any matches, don't get off a hoss where they can see, don't take off your hat—the damn cows might spook. Okay. What'll I do if I see these hombres you're talkin' about? Sic Chihuahua onto them?"

"Shoot if you got to." Charley gave him a hard black look. Pete turned away. He was afraid Charley would see something in his eyes that should be kept hidden.

Over his shoulder, Pete growled, "Didn't know I was gettin' shootin' pay."

Slowly Green rose out of his crouch and his heavy, pounding steps brought him to Pete. Pete turned. Green put a big hand on his shoulder.

"Pete, when a man takes my dollar, I figure him for my right arm." His eyes were level on Pete's face. He couldn't meet them. "If he's got stock with me, like Joe Atley has, or not. Next trip you can bring stuff of your own, or your daddy's. But now you're my right arm just the same."

He left then. Pete was glad. He didn't like not looking square at a man.

IT SEEMED that dark had hardly fallen. He and Chihuahua had been riding only an hour or so after supper, when Karp's cigarette moved up and down. A tiny, burning pinpoint of light. At the same moment he heard a low growl rasp out of Chihuahua's throat. He glanced down. The dog stood stiff-legged, his hair on end from shoulders to tail.

"'S all right, boy," he whispered. "Easy now."

He looked around. Two hours until moonrise. No wind now, the dust hanging thick. Off in the east a clash of thunder, so far away that it was only like crumpling paper when it reached him. The cows heard it better and were uneasy.

Suddenly shapes loomed to his left.

Vague blotches until they were within thirty feet. He could see five men. Four had drawn guns in their hands. He heard Karp's hoarse whisper, "It's okay, that's our boy." A couple reholstered their weapons.

It was too dark to see much what they looked like. Two had their hats pulled low, and he could only see quick flashes of eye whites, eyes roving over the cattle before them. Hard-mouthed, bearded men with fingers playing nervously over their guns.

A bull-chested man in their midst was running the show. He spat out quick orders, after a moment of listening and watching the herd. "Spud and Lem—cut in there to the right. Work up ahead. Dave will pull a point off and you'll bend 'em over behind him. Now git."

The three men moved off like ghosts. They went slowly enough that they'd look like Green's own men if anybody saw them. Pete, Karp, and the leader sat waiting.

"How 'bout the money?" Karp whined.

The leader swore under his breath but did not answer. He was rolling a cigarette, carefully, slowly, but Pete could see his eyes were intent and he seemed to sniff the air like a buffalo. He looked down at Chihuahua. The dog was still growling, his hackles up.

"Shut that damn dog up," the leader rasped.

Pete whispered, "All right, Chihuahua. Quiet now, quiet, boy." But the dog's nose was still pointed up at the outlaw leader and the growl only deepened.

Suddenly a flame burst. Pete felt his horse jerk at the surprise of it. It took him a moment to realize the leader had only lit a match for his cigarette.

With a snarl, Chihuahua leaped. Clawed his way up the leader's leg—like he did Pete's when he wanted to get into the saddle. But he didn't want that. He sank his big hound's teeth into the man's thigh.

"Aiyahh!" the leader yelled. The match fell and blinked out. After it the thin white flash of a falling cigarette. The dog fell away.

"Chihuahua!" Pete yelled, forgetting he shouldn't yell around already-spooked cattle. "Leave 'em, Chihuahua!"

But the dog ignored him, returned slashing to the attack. Again he leaped, this time missing the man's leg but ripping his teeth into the horse's neck. The animal reared, squealing, threw the dog to the ground. As the leader fought his horse down, he jerked out his six gun. Chihuahua came back a third time, slashing with open jaws dripping with blood. This time the gun chopped down before he could bite. There was a sharp cr-rack! The dog yelped and fell in a limp heap to the ground.

PETE watched with open mouth as the leader fought down his bucking horse, and then spurred it viciously forward toward the dog. "Hoof 'em! Hoof 'em!" he snarled.

Pete let out a yell. He wheeled his pony around before the clawing hoofs of the outlaw's horse, blocked it. He dropped down and seized the dog's hind leg. It was limp. He swung it up over the saddle where it draped like a half-empty sack of meal. The outlaw horse was crowding against him then. He kneed his mount away from it.

"You dirty son!" he rasped at the outlaw. "Get the hell out of here!"

"Pete!" Karp cried, "Shut up or you'll run those cows!"

Pete wasn't worried about the cows now. They were milling already. He could hear the nervous trample of hoofs, and when they started milling you weren't likely to stop them. He was thinking, "Chihuahua, the little hound! He's got more guts than me! Him defendin' the cows, and me sittin' here waitin' for a couple pieces of paper money!"

"Hell out of here!" he yelled at the outlaw.

The leader grunted. "Get 'em, Karp."

Karp was already riding in at him, swinging his six gun. He wasn't going to shoot. Karp still didn't want to send loud notice of what was going on. He clubbed the pistol and took a long swing at Pete.

Pete's hands were busy with dog and reins. He tried to knee his horse away. Karp chopped his gun down. The barrel bit Pete's shoulder. Agony wrenched at the bones. He let go the reins and rammed a fist at Karp's twisted knot of a face. Skin ripped off the knuckle of his little finger. Karp dodged away and crowded his horse in, chopped the gun down on Pete's head. It sent him reeling back and darkness blacker than the night passed before his eyes. He almost lost his seat, had to grab the saddle horn with his right hand to bring himself back.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the outlaw leader, riding in on them, shouting and brandishing his gun. There were cattle between them, but he was plunging through. It had to go fast.

Karp raised his gun to strike, hate dragging his face into a hideous, grooved mask. Pete's pony stumbled over against him. Pete leaned far out of the saddle. He aimed for Karp's face and hefted his whole body, leaning, hoping the pony would bore on in.

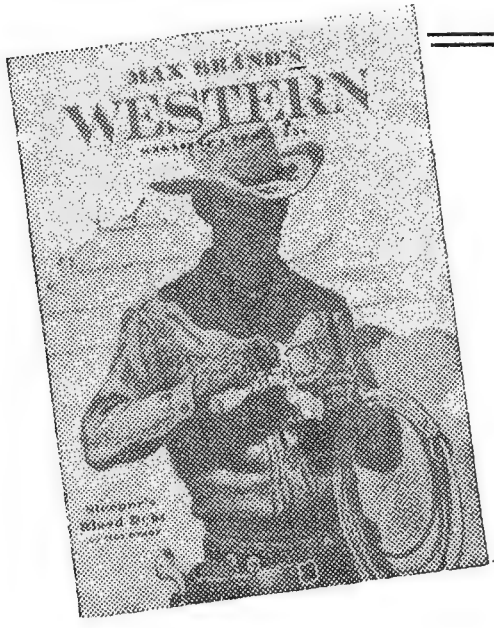
Karp's twisted face rammed into his fist with a crunch, and instantlly Pete knew it was done. Half his fist snapped teeth. The index knuckle squished nose cartilage flat and came away dripping blood.

Karp was going down. His left leg swung up over the saddle as he fell, the boot stabbing to catch the horn. It missed. He rolled and was gone over the pony's tail.

Pete swung around, looking for the outlaw leader. He was farther away now, as a crazed crush of cattle widened the gap between them. As he looked Pete saw flame lash out from the shadowed, dusk-masked figure. He wasn't hit, but the gun-roar drove the cattle wild. He managed to get out his gun and fire at the outlaw. The man seemed to jerk, then bend low over his saddle. He wheeled off into swirls of dust and was lost.

Pete didn't shoot again. It was all a black, crazy nightmare of dust and darkness, with cattle roaring and trampling in every direction. It was stampede, and Pete could only work his way out of it, clinging to the limp body of Charley

(Continued on page 106)



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CHAPTER ONE

A Man Is Hung

TWO MEN rode out from the thicket under the great dead jack pine and headed for the trail through a fine white sleet of a mountain storm. Where the trail chuted into a canyon they turned in their saddles and looked back at the hanged man.

Through the moving curtains of white, they saw the body, suspended from one high limb of the dead pine, swinging in the cold air currents that sluiced straight from the peaks. Like the grotesque pendulum of a clock, that body moved to and fro from a short length of rope—booted feet dangling far above the brush tops.

The smaller of the two riders, as he looked back, crossed himself. The other, whose huge mackinaw-clad figure looked almost as big as the horse he rode, sneered.

"Come on, yuh damn Mex!" he ordered.

Dead Man's Brand

By RAY NAFZIGER

The smaller of the two riders, as he looked back, crossed himself.

Under the rugged bludgeonings of fate, Mary Thurlew would sell out neither her fierce pride nor her splendid courage. For she knew that, from the blizzard-bitten Hachitas to desolate, sun-baked Chihuahua, the battle is lost only when you quit fighting. . . . An unforgettable epic of an equally unforgettable frontier family.

"Want to paint a picture of it so's yuh'll remember it better?"

"I theenk I remember a long time, weethout picture," said the smaller rider with the soft voice of the Spanish-tongued. "I theenk you remember long time, too—no?"

The big man jerked hard on his bit and swung his horse to face the below-the-Border *vaquero*. Menacingly, one big hand shifted toward his belt-gun. For a few seconds he sat frowning at the Mexican, who looked back at him watchfully from deep-set coffee-colored eyes. His own small dark hand lay caressingly on the gun in his holster.

Then a grin put a white-toothed slit in his small swarthy face. "You theenk better only one man have secret like thees?" he asked, still speaking softly.

"Hell, no?" growled the other. "Yo're in the same boat. And this won't be no secret long. He's plumb easy to see, hangin' high thataway. Somebody'll stumble on him quick."

A thicker blanket of snow swirled down on the clearing, blotted out for a moment the hanging figure, revealed it again in its deliberate swinging before the push of invisible fingers.

The big-framed American stared at it, then suddenly laughed harshly. "Tick-tock! tick-tock!" he gibed. At which the little Mexican started visibly and crossed himself again. To his superstitious soul, as they rode along the rocky trail, their horses' shoes clattered an echo to the "tick-tock." Not until they clumped out on the soft turf of a piñon-studded mesa did he cease finally to cross himself.

Behind them the mountain with its ghostly swinging corpse was blotted from sight of the pair. But not from their memories. . . .

IT WAS two hours later that a woman rode from the thicket beneath the dead pine to take the same trail. Tied to the saddle of the horse she led was the hanged man, head and arms dangling on one side, legs on the other.

Down from the spruce and pine to a canyon filled with yucca and mesquite, the black-haired young woman who was Mary Thurlew rode, dry-eyed, taking home her husband.

Around her the falling snow swirled in high walls that mercifully enclosed her and the dead man—and her grief. The agony that filled her was too deep for tears. Something had died within her at sight of that high gruesome pendulum which was Charley Thurlew, found by her after his riderless horse had come to the corrals.

Sometimes on her journey a terrible shuddering shook her body. A ranch woman of the Hachitas was prepared to accept tragedy, but even her long line of pioneer blood could not steel her against this horror. Not against the hanging of her husband for rustling.

She had doubts but that rude justice had been done. Reports of lynch threats had been broadcast in the Hachitas: short shrift at rope's end for rustlers. A party of neighbors must have caught him redhanded—passed sentence and executed him on the spot. Hanged Charley Thurlew whom she loved, even though he had failed her in many ways.

At eighteen, with a beauty that was famous over a thousand square miles of range, she could have married any one of twenty men. Among them Charley Thurlew's stepbrother, "Rock" Logan, owner of the big Double T outfit on the other side of the mountain range. But following her heart, she had chosen the handsome, irresponsible sixty-dollar-a-month cowpuncher for better or worse, had worked and planned with him to reach the heights of their own small outfit. And now he was hanged. . . .

A sick anger flared within her, and a thirst for revenge, but she managed to bury it deep within her during the ride back to

the ranch. Charley Thurlew was of the past; revenge could not bring him back nor help the two sons who were sleeping in the little cabin.

Besides, raised as she had been in a hard frontier code that found a rope necessary for thieves, what was there to revenge? A dour, silent lot of men in the Hachitas, but they were just according to their code: they would not move without being sure. She had long suspected that Charley Thurlew was adopting other cattle, with the alibi to himself that others were adopting his—no excuse in the upright family from which she had come.

She knew that any complaint to the law, any investigation would meet a stone wall. Her stern-eyed neighbors were a secretive crew; they talked rarely, and never at all about a matter like this. Perhaps for that reason no word of it would ever come to her boys. If she smothered her horror, kept her knowledge of that swinging figure locked in her breast, they might never know.

She stopped at the stable, got a lantern and shovel, crept into the house for blankets and rode on down the creek to a huge sycamore. In the driving snow the lantern and shovel threw a pale circle of light. Fastened to a limb, the lantern swung in the wind as had the corpse, while Mary Thurlew, in ground which had not yet frozen, gouged out a low, narrow trench.

Two feet below the surface, three feet, four, and then she was standing in the grave almost up to her shoulders flinging out shovelfuls of earth. Finally, weary, shivering, she clambered out to stand in the lantern light with a face as white as the falling snow.

A few moments more and it would be over. The same blankets that had covered her and this man were wrapped about him, dressed as he had been found, in chaps and brush jacket. Fine pellets of snow gathered in the blanket folds as she lowered the form into the grave.

For a short moment she stood with clenched hands, her head bare to the storm, biting her lips to keep from screaming, praying for courage; courage to be silent, to keep her head erect for the sake of the two boys who slept unknowing in the cabin lean-to.

Praying for strength to keep, not only their small heritage of cattle and range for them, but more important, their heritage of pride and self-respect, so that they might face the world unashamed.

THE house was cold when she entered it. In the tacked-on sleeping room was a home-made bed of aspen poles, covered with a gay block quilt. At the top of the quilt were two heads—the blond one of twelve-year-old Vance, and the dark one of ten-year-old Tom Thurlew. Kneeling by the bed, the woman whispered their names softly, not intending to wake them. But the younger, Tom, lifted himself on an arm and stared soberly at his mother.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "Hasn't Charley come home yet?" They had always called their irresponsible, happy-go-lucky father Charley. He had never quite gained the full dignity of a father.

"Nothing's wrong," she whispered back, "except that Charley had to ride out of the country. He may not come back for a long time. He—he got in trouble; had to leave, Tom. You and Vance will have to be the men here now."

Young Tom nodded his head gravely. He had Mary Thurlew's light blue eyes, her thick blue-black hair. Vance had his father's blondness. "So Charley had to ride?" Tom said. "Did he kill somebody, Mom?"

Her eyes met his steadily. "Not that. But he had to go. He may never come back."

And then as her arms went around the boy, for the first time during the night the hot tears came, streaking her smooth face, still young and pretty. The strength of

Tom's arms, closing tightly about her, stopped her weeping. "You're the handiest around the ranch, Tom, although Vance is two years older. I'll have to depend on you more than him to help me. Now go to sleep, son."

The boy nodded in a troubled manner, knowing that she was holding back from him what had really happened.

The lantern retreated from the room, and Mary Thurlew looked through the windows at the snow, piling up in the lee of the cabin wall. It would also be heaping in soft mounds over the grave hidden under the sycamore, the grave that could never have a marker.

ABOUT the hanging itself—whether it had been done by a small group of men or a large one, what hands had adjusted the noose—Mary Thurlew never learned. She did not want to know, holding steadfastly to her duty to the living. The word she gave that Charley Thurlew had ridden out of the country was accepted by her scattered neighbors. And whether she ever heard from him or why he had gone—it was her affair.

In man's levis and wool shirt and thick neckerchief she took Charley Thurlew's place during the years, helped more and more by Vance and Tom as they grew older. She more than took indolent Charley's place, the neighbors remarked of the plucky woman. The ranch had never been as well run. She rode like a man, roped, branded, hunted renegade steers out of brushy canonsides. She trapped coyotes and wolves, built drift fence, rode in blizzards gathering cattle, moved the same cattle to water in time of drought.

She did not have to do these things—there were men who knew she was still beautiful, who had loved her in the old days when Charley Thurlew had won.

The wealthiest of these, her husband's stepbrother, Rock Logan, from the other side of the range, had made her an offer a year after the disappearance of Charley Thurlew. The most cordially hated and feared man in the country, he had come up and dismounted while she was repairing a breaking corral.

"Guess you know why I've come, Mary," he said in his clipped way of talking. "You chose Charley once over me. He's deserted yuh, givin' ground for a divorce. Now that he's gone, I've come to offer you a partnership in a real ranch—with five thousand head of cattle."

"No," she told him flatly. Never this man, Rock Logan, who was as hard as granite to her, living for himself, brutal to men and horses, plain mean, with no good quality that anyone had ever been able to discover.

He forced a grin, angry because he had expected a different answer, his slate eyes malignant. "Some day, Mary," he said slowly, "yuh will. Don't forget that. What I want, I get. Savvy?"

And then his big hands came out to grasp her wrists, to pull her toward him, the strength of his huge body making light of the struggle she made against him. "I'm givin' yuh just one kiss," he said, "to put my brand on you."

But Logan had made a mistake in thinking that she was alone at the ranch. Tom, climbing up the creek bank behind them, stopped dead at sight of the figures, and then ran across, shouting hoarsely. Rock Logan released Mary Thurlew and swung to face the boy, hand falling to his hip. He had to work fast for Tom, snatching up a spade by a post hole of the corral, was flinging himself at the rancher.

Rock flinched at sight of the blade, hurried his shot and it went wild. Coming straight on, Tom drove the spade into Rock Logan's right shoulder, staggering the big man. His gun flew far from him.

"Damn you!" cried Logan, but weaponless he dared not face the threat of the spade. Bellowing, he leaped on his horse to ride the boy down, sending Tom rolling

over and over on the ground. Jerking his horse around, Rock again rode for the boy, intending to grind him under the hoofs, a brutal, horrible thing. Midway he stopped, swerved to the side, seeing suddenly Mary Thurlew with his six-shooter, throwing down on him. He flung up his hands, calling that she quit.

"Never come back here!" she ordered. Rock Logan knew if his horse's hoofs had again struck Mary Thurlew's son, he would have been shot dead.

THE promise of steadiness in young Tom was fulfilled. At sixteen he handled cattle on the range better than most men, and the colts he broke out and seasoned slowly into rope work had no equal as rock horses in the Hachitas.

Vance, the older boy, would never make a good hand. He was plainly meant for something other than ranching. He was quick and learned easily, soaking in books as readily as Tom soaked in the savvy of ranch work. He wanted to be a lawyer, and by desperate economy Mary Thurlew sent him away to school, a little college in a neighboring state. Some day when the boys were both grown, they would sell the ranch and leave these Hachitas and that unmarked grave under the sycamore. As well as the shadow of the hanging man Mary Thurlew often saw when masses of clouds drifted between the sun and a mountain slope.

CHAPTER TWO

Money for Life

AT EIGHTEEN Tom Thurlew was a man—every one of his seventy-two inches. No better rider in the country; few better cowboys. He returned on his eighteenth birthday from the Dos Hermanos round-up, put his arm around his mother, kissed her and announced that he was home for the winter. He would ride their own range with a neighbor cowboy, Bill Grow, whose pretty sister, Ellen, was much given to teasing such women-shy cowboys as Tom.

Mary Thurlew smiled proudly on Tom, announcing that she had made a cake for his birthday and had invited over the Grows for supper. The Grows were the only neighbors with whom the Thurlews were close friends. The family had moved in long after the hanging, and only with them did Mary Thurlew ever feel wholly at ease, for at least none of them had fashioned the gruesome hangman's knot.

It was late afternoon when Tom came home, but still time, he said cheerfully, for a short ride. Topping the canyon rim above the house, he drew up his mount and glanced at the mists rolling over the little valley below. Then he leaned forward in his saddle.

Along a trail, a horseman on an uncurried little pony was jogging north. The dinner-plate horn saddle and huge peaked hat told that he was one of the Mexican vaqueros who occasionally drifted up to make excellent hands on American ranches.

As Tom watched, he suddenly saw the man jerk his horse up short, just as the valley shook under the roaring explosion of a gun. Another shot and the Mexican was in full flight, rolling his big spurs, racing straight toward the hill on which Tom Thurlew sat silhouetted. Two riflemen were trying to pot the man from the fringe of timber, where they had evidently laid for him.

As two hunters would try to bring down a deer, they kept firing. And as they got the range, the rough-haired pony went down, somersaulted and lay with his legs churning furious arcs.

The little rider hit the ground hard. Scrambling to his feet he ran on stiffly, while the rifles continued to hammer from the trees.

Sight of the cold-blooded murder attempt was more than Tom could stand. He kicked spurs in his mount and drummed down the

hill, jerking his rifle from its scabbard. Bringing it to his shoulder, he fired into the trees, ejected the shell and flung his rifle to his shoulder again.

The guns, pecking away at the fleeing man, must have hit his left leg, for he ran limpingly. He was trying to make it to a dry waterhole. Tom could see the Mexican's set face, old, gray-bearded. Forty feet from the man, Tom's horse grunted and went down, slowly enough for Tom to dismount without falling. Another shot and the Mexican, a big hole torn in his somberero spun around like a top and fell flat.

Racing to him, Tom dragged him on to the dry tank which was little bigger than a buffalo wallow. As they both dropped, a bullet found Tom. He went down gasping with pain, a searing flame eating at the small of his back.

THERE was something familiar about the old Mexican and Tom spoke to him in his own language, asking him if he were the Chone Villa who had once worked for Rock Logan. The vaquero, dazed, merely nodded and lay with closed eyes, bleeding from the leg and with more blood seeping from under his sombrero brim.

Shots still poured from the timber, either sailing low over the tank or kicking up little puffs of earth in front of it. Tom clamped his teeth and reloaded his rifle with leaden fingers. Twice he fought off waves of flaming agony and emptied his gun.

His shots seemed to discourage the two bushwhackers. Their guns fell silent and he guessed finally they had ridden away. He was close enough to home he thought so that his mother would have heard the shots. . . .

As it happened, Mary Thurlew had heard. Now cinching a saddle on a hammerhead, half-broken horse in the corral, she came spurring over the hill to find them, lying in pools of blood, the old, gray Mexican and Tom, both unconscious.

Tom stirred as she knelt to examine the horrible wound the bullet made in his back.

"Two men—shooting at him from the timber," Tom gasped. "Rode down—try help him. I'll be all right. Look after him. He's Chone Villa. Worked for Rock Logan years ago."

The bullet hole in the wizened Mexican's leg was not serious; the one through his hat had evidently only stunned him.

She had to leave them, to ride to their neighbors, the Grows. One of the Grow boys raced for a doctor; the others brought a low-wheeled wagon and took the wounded men to the Thurlew cabin. There Ellen Grow remained to help attend them. The birthday cake sat unnoticed while the boy lay pitifully helpless, suffering untold agonies until the doctor arrived to ease his pain with drugs.

His body shattered, Mary Thurlew was thinking, defending an old man who had been beset from ambush for reasons which, if he knew, he kept to himself. Chone Villa would be laid up for a few days at most. He was not even in bed, but sat with his muddy eyes emotionless, staring at the ceiling, rolling innumerable brown-paper cigarettes.

The doctor from Highline brusquely gave his decision. The removal of the bullet which lay against the spine was so delicate an operation that it could not be done in that country. The nearest surgeon who would attempt it was in a city a thousand miles away.

"An expensive affair, Mrs. Thurlew," he warned her. "The cost will be at the very least a thousand dollars."

A thousand dollars! It might as well have been a million. And Tom lay on his back, helpless. Would he ride out on the long trail for lack of a thousand dollars?

She rode next morning to the bank at Highline, which already held a mortgage on her ranch and stock, most of it borrowed to send Vance to school.

The cashier, an old friend, shook his head. "Knowing you and Tom, we might

have been able to accommodate you. But I got my orders this morning, Mary. From someone who had heard that you might be wanting a thousand dollars."

"Rock Logan you mean?" she asked. The stepbrother of Rock Logan was director and largest stockholder and practically in control of the bank.

"Too bad, Mary," said the cashier, thinking of the fresh beauty of the young girl who had married Charley Thurlew a long time ago. She was still beautiful. Rock Logan still wanted to marry her, boasted openly that he had waited for her all these years and would have her some day.

IN DESPAIR she went to the station, sent Vance a telegram at his school, explaining the need for money. Vance was clever; he could surely think of some way to raise it. She herself was numb, unable to think of any way to turn except to Hein Gahagen, the local money-lending Shylock. He often took long chances in hope of high returns. But she found him uninterested in taking chances on a wounded cowboy who needed a costly operation.

A fat, padded barrel of a man with pendulous pouches below his bulging eyes, Hein regarded her thoughtfully. "A thousand dollars, Mary?" he said in his high shrill voice. "There is a thousand dollars up in the mountains, but not for no woman. They cannot keep secrets."

"I need a thousand dollars," stated Mary Thurlew, "and if it is up there in the mountains, I will get it. Whether I can get it or not, it will still be a secret. For a long time I have been keeping a greater secret than any you could tell me."

"Well," Hein said, "it might be done. A thousand dollars. You and someone you can trust. Better to be three."

His fat body bent over hers. "Listen," he whispered. "On West Peak in the old Box A pasture of the Walters estate. Eighty head of four-year-olds. If they could be delivered to the loading pens at the mouth of Burke Canyon, I can get an inspector's permit for 'em, and they will be out of the state and sold before the estate learns of it. To have those steers delivered to Burke Canyon and nothing said—I would give you a thousand dollars. A big price, but ropes grow on saddles in this country for rustlers. But of course you wouldn't be interested. Too bad. Too bad."

Mary Thurlew's mouth was a cold, hard line. "I don't know if I'd be interested or not, Hein," she told him. "I might try it, if I have to. Give me two days—either to do it or not."

Out in the street she turned to the Hachitas, their peaks white with snow, and under scudding clouds she saw the shadow of a hanging man, vast, moving slowly. The ranch woman shivered and turned to find Rock Logan blocking her way. Since he had tried to trample Tom Thurlew beneath his horse's hoofs, Rock had grown older, more sinister, gaunt, his slate-like eyes harder.

"I've heard about Tom's accident," he drawled. "Too bad. And I heard, Mary, yuh need a thousand dollars for an operation."

"That is too bad, too," she said bitterly. "It is too bad that you heard of it, Rock, before I asked the bank for a loan. You beast!" she flung out at him. "Get out of my road."

But Rock Logan stayed in front of her, his eyes glinting a little. "There's always been one thing I wanted," he told her. "Everything else I got except this." His hand tapped her riding cuff. "You. I knowed I'd get that, too—if I waited. People laughed at hearin' Rock Logan was still thinking that Mary Thurlew would marry him some day. Now they will see. It'd be easy for you to have a thousand dollar check."

Her face flamed. "That easy way of getting a thousand dollars," she said, thinking of Hein Gahagen's offer, "makes it easy to try something else."

"Maybe," he sneered, "you still hope Charley Thurlew will come riding back. It'd be lucky, wouldn't it now, if he was to drop into town here today, rich and able to hand over a thousand dollars?"

Cruel laughter shook his big body; followed her as she mounted her horse to take the long way back to the ranch. At the railroad station she stopped to see if word had come from Vance, although of course there had not yet been time. Vance would be already busy trying to gather the money. There was nothing the two brothers would not do for each other.

The weather was turning cold, and a mist was shifting in a slow dance over the snow-covered peaks. Wearily she rode homeward, afraid to go back into the room where Tom lay. If only Vance were here to help.

She was to remember that wish a few minutes later when in their canyon a little distance from the ranch buildings, a ghost on a worn, weary horse came riding out of the trees as if he had been skulking there, waiting for her. A young fellow, thin, haggard, long-haired, blond-bearded, ragged, on a ribby horse.

Vance!

CHAPTER THREE

Yellow Brand

SHE rode up close to him, wondering at his changed appearance. He who had always been ready of speech, as handsome, was now transformed to a scarecrow.

"You've got to help me!" he said hoarsely. "They're after me."

He shook as if the chill had reached his bones. All his alert cleverness was plainly drowned by stark fear. "They're after me. Been after me for weeks. From up north. The fellow with me shot a man—didn't kill him—but it's the pen sure if they catch me."

"You're joking, Vance!" she said, but she knew it was the truth. "You've been in school all this time. How could you have been in trouble?"

"I haven't been in school. Quit two months ago. Used the money you sent to outfit for a prospecting trip up in the Trumbulls. Got fed up with school."

Laid bare in him was the same weakness that had been the curse of her husband, and she wondered why she had not seen it in all the years.

"What did this shooting trouble start with, Vance?" she asked swiftly.

"As I said, this fellow and me went prospecting. When we didn't strike anything, I went to live with his family and joined up on some night riding—on a neighbor's range."

"Rustling cattle?" she said in a voice so harsh and changed from her usual soft one that Vance stared at her. "You'd better come up to the house, Vance."

"I can't. Where's Tom?"

"He's at the house," she said fiercely. "With a bullet against his spine, and he didn't get it stealing cattle. Was shot helping an old Mexican dodge drygulchers' lead. And the operation to get it out will take a thousand dollars. I wired you today, thinking you might help. You! Help!" Her voice rose scornfully. "We worked and fought, Tom and I, to give you your chance, and you ride home asking help to escape the law."

Before the flames in his mother's eyes Vance hunched down in his saddle and eyed the ground sullenly. Mary Thurlew looked at him, thinking the bitterest thought that a mother may think—wishing that this son had never been born. This was not the Vance for whom she had done a man's work on the range. He was someone else—like an apparently sound tree whose heart is eaten out and topples over at the first push of a hard wind.

"And we spent all these years, Tom and I, trying to give you a chance. A chance to rustle cattle. It must run in the family. Come on to the house, Vance. I want you to

see your brother. Look at a real man."

"But I can't," he protested. "Ellen Grow rode in there a while ago. She might give me away. As it is, I might get away. They were following me, but I gave them the slip in a big storm north of here. I'm sorry about Tom, but you can see I can't help him. All I need is a little money to make it across the Border."

"Money!" repeated Mary Thurlew. "You've got to have money to make it across the Border? Why should I give you money to go to Mexico? I've nothing against Mexico."

"I thought you'd be one that would stick up for me," he whined. Whining—Mary Thurlew's son—with panic in his voice, in his eyes, in his face.

"It's been too hard a life to spend time or money to prop up something rotten, son," she said slowly. "These Hachita Mountains have been too hard, Vance, to provide a fatted calf for a prodigal son—when a real man lies dying. If you were in his place, Tom would be doing nothing short of holding up a bank to get that thousand."

SHE straightened suddenly in the saddle. "You're going to help Tom—tonight. You're going to help me to do something that before this I'd have cut off my right hand rather than do. In the old Box A pasture up on West Peak are eighty steers, owned by an estate. I can get a thousand dollars for delivering them to Burke Canyon. It means risk, of course. But you'll help me."

"Who, me?" he protested. "For God's sake, mix in more cattle stealing? Risk getting a bullet in me? I've got no time, and I ain't got the nerve left to risk facing a gun. I was hit up there, in the leg. Been suffering hell from it while hiding out. It swelled up so I thought I'd lost it. I can't go; won't!"

Mary Thurlew looked at him unbelievingly. "You mean," she half whispered, "that—not even for Tom—you wouldn't do what you did up north to get a few easy dollars for yourself?"

"I can't do it for anyone!" he maintained stubbornly. "I'm tellin' yuh—I can't face a gun. I—I—"

The wind was roaring through the pines on the upper canyon wall. In it Mary Thurlew could hear the moaning of Tom the night before when he had lain unconscious.

"Your nerve is gone all right," she admitted. "But I'm seeing that you get enough of it back to go with me. I'm dealing you out a hand, son, and you'll either ride along tonight or I send you in to the sheriff. I mean that."

Vance stared at her with small sweat beads springing on his forehead.

"Take your choice," she said unevenly. "And now come on to the house and look at a real man. He's probably out of his head, and he may die, but it might do you good to see him, Vance. And I'll find some whisky to bolster your nerve. What there is of it . . ."

"Are you coming or not, Vance?" she said harshly.

And Vance, still keeping his gaze on the ground, shivered, sick with fear, but nodded.

TOM was lying in his bed, quiet under the influence of a hypodermic. The old Mexican, Chone Villa, had ridden out that morning, Ellen Grow told Mary Thurlew. Without a word of explanation or thanks, borrowing one of the Thurlew's horses.

Vance sat shivering, silent, while his mother made preparations to ride. Toward sunset she gave him a mackinaw, Tom's goat-hair chaps, Tom's .30-30 Winchester and a six-shooter. He shrank from the guns; he had told the truth when he said he could not face a gun.

At the corrals, Mary Thurlew slipped a rifle into the scabbard of her saddle; she had already buckled a cartridge belt around her waist with a filled holster.

Just before they left she gave Vance a

half tumbler of whiskey. The rest of the bottle she took in a flask. It was hard when a son had to be fed up on whisky—like whipping a spiritless horse. She ordered him curtly to ride ahead of her, afraid he might turn his horse and try to escape.

The clouds were rolling low over the upper ridges, hiding completely the high peaks. Below those topmost peaks were eighty head of steers in a pasture, needing someone with enough nerve to haze them down to Burke Canyon. Hein Gahagen was a crook, but his word was good. If ten cattle were driven off the mountain to the pens on the narrow gauge the promised money would be forthcoming.

Vance hesitated when they were out of the canyon and began their climb into the snowy upper country.

"Better take a swallow of this," his mother advised, and held out the flask. He took it eagerly, lifted it.

"You remember this country, I guess," she went on tonelessly. "We've got to take that trail up Padilla Canyon over the pass, and then swing down by the way of the sawmill. If anyone tries to stop us, we've got to keep on. Savvy?"

One gloved hand motioned him on, and he went like a whipped cur.

The wind was blowing hard as twilight came, but the night would be clear, almost of a daylight brilliance in the snowy canyons. Resolute as she was, the ranch woman was shivering a little as they climbed the trails. The snow lifted but the broom of the wind was swirling high, almost like a storm. Such a storm as the night when she had found the body of Charley Thurlew swinging to and fro from the high limb of the dead jack-pine.

Filled with ghosts for both, the night folded them in. Saddle leather squeaked in the rustle of dry snow, muffling the clump of hoofs as they followed an interminable trail, across switchbacks, winding upward. Vance rode hunched over, ears in the collar of the mackinaw, but every sense of Mary Thurlew was alert. She drew up suddenly on a point and breathed her laboring horse.

"Someone following us," she said. "I heard them. Go on—lead my horse. Wait for me up in the trees." And she slipped from her saddle, taking her rifle, to crouch in a tangle of high oak brush by the trail.

* * *

Five minutes and a horse with a small rider shouldered up the trail. Mary Thurlew emerged as he came even with her, held the rifle barrel straight at his head. It was the Mexican whom Tom had saved.

"Ah, *Señora*," said Chone Villa humbly. "*Señorita* Grow say you were riding. I hav' follow you."

"Yes? What for?" she demanded crisply.

The old Mexican, weak, pale, sitting a little uncertainly in the saddle, reached out to her a small flat package. "Tomorrow I theenk I go back to *Mejico*. Thees for Tom. To remember an old *paisano*."

The parcel was flat, wrapped in newspaper. She stuffed it into her mackinaw absently.

"You ride tonight?" he went on politely. "Maybe I ride weeth you to help," he suggested.

She studied him, knowing nothing of him save that once he had worked for Rock Logan, which certainly was no recommendation. Yet she could not depend on Vance. "We could use you, but it might be dangerous. I'm going up for some cattle in the Box A pasture. Not my cattle."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I did not ask whose cattle, *Señora*. Better for three people to drive cattle at night, no?"

"This is one time where three sure don't make a crowd," she said dryly. "Come on then, Chone."

THEY went on to where Vance waited, and then toiled upward by stages. On the edge of a clearing of a little summer

camp they stopped. In front of a tumble-down shack the remains of a little deserted camp fire glowed against the snow. Someone had been there recently. Tracks of three horsemen led from the fire up the trail to the Box A pasture.

Mary Thurlew stared at them, her face hard. The cowboys for the Box A would not have come up by this trail. These were other men journeying toward the Box A pasture—perhaps to steal those cattle.

"Somebody's trying to beat our time, maybe," she said. "Plenty competition when you are in honest work or in dishonest."

Vance lifted his head. "Three men ahead of us," he said with relief. "No use of our going up then."

"Why not?" she asked flatly. "They're thieves like us. What have we got these guns for? Push on, son."

She rode away, then, with Vance following unwillingly. A half-mile on and they ran into a few of the cattle, hazed them along, and ran into some more. They heard old Chone bringing another bunch down into the canyon and held up to wait for him.

Making a count, they found they had all of them, and shoved them along the fence toward the gate.

From the gate a trail led over a high little mesa and descended by a succession of canyons. The steers would almost drive themselves. The snow raised by the wind rustled about them, and the moon rode into drifting clouds, but there was still plenty of light to see the trail.

They opened the gate, and the herd lined out like soldiers, turning naturally along the road that went across a tree-fringed narrow strip of meadow.

Chone was up at point. Mary Thurlew and Vance were bringing up the rear, separated, each riding through the trees at the side of the meadow to make sure that no snaky animals cut back into the brush. Fifty yards they went, and then Vance cried out suddenly. A gun flamed from a little hill around which the herd was splitting, and a bullet whirred by his head.

CHAPTER FOUR

Secret of the Dead

TURNING tail abjectly, Vance spurred his horse into the brush. Behind him the meadow was suddenly alive with the harsh-throated roar of guns. A bullet cut his horse's neck and the animal started pitching. In his panic Vance flung himself from the saddle. Landing badly shaken, he ran clumsily in his boots and goat-haired chaps, to dive headlong into a thicket drifted with snow.

A gun was booming from the other side of the meadow; his mother, he guessed, firing across at the men who had attacked them, three rustlers who had waited for the other party to round up the pasture.

Shamed, Vance started to get up. And then as a stray bullet slapped into a tree over his head, he lay whimpering. There was the thunder of hoofs and the stampeding steers were being turned to the right by whooping riders.

He continued to lie in the drift, shivering with fear, listening to the dry rustle of snow about him. The crashing that the running cattle made through the trees gradually faded, and silence fell over the meadow.

Only then, shaking, muttering, Vance crawled out of the brush and found his horse not far away. The poor animal was hobbling pitifully, having put a foot through the loop made by the closed bridle reins.

Then a panic seized Vance which was greater even than his fear of the guns. Silence everywhere in the meadow; silence in the trees where his mother had been riding.

Mounting, he spurred the horse furiously across to head into the trees, calling for his mother. When no answer came, he searched through the brush, racing at top speed, chaps batting against the small tree trunks. Making a wide circle, he found a small

ravine and a horse that was picking a slow way out of the tangle. His mother's horse, and the saddle was empty!

His horse crashed down over the cut-bank into the ravine, while he called again. Then he saw a crumpled mackinaw-clad figure, lying in a little clear space. Mary Thurlew's hat had fallen from her head; her black hair was fanned out over the snow, and on part of it there was blood from a cut. Evidently her horse had fallen over the bank and she pitched off, had struck a rock.

He rubbed snow on her face and she stirred as he lifted her to place an arm under her shoulders. For a moment she looked at him vacantly, and then tried to twist away from his arm, to attempt to stagger to her feet.

"You didn't fight!" she burst out. "You didn't fire a shot. You get my horse or give me yours. I'm going after those cattle. They're going to be delivered at Burke Canyon."

"I'll get your horse," he said gently, "but you're riding on home. You're hurt, had no business out here, anyway. I'll see that those cattle are delivered to the Burke Canyon pens. I promise. They've turned them down toward the old Fort road."

"You promise!" she said contemptuously. By an effort she managed to stand shakily. "You! Anyway, I couldn't do it alone now. I'm giving up. I'm riding down now to see if I can find old Chone and go home. You can sneak on for the Border, Vance. There's still one way out for Tom. I had an offer from Rock Logan. He wants to marry me. It's worth a thousand dollars to him."

"Rock Logan!" Vance's teeth clicked shut. "You marry that hog? Give me till morning. If I don't show up then, you'll know I failed."

Someone came riding up toward them on a little jog trot. Chone Villa, shot in the left arm, holding it wrapped in his neckerchief, between the buttons of his jacket.

"You are hurt, *Señora?*" said Chone. "You weel ride home then, while *Don* Vance and me we go after them. And the package," Chone reminded her. "You weel geev to Tom, *Señora?*"

She had forgotten the parcel in her coat, but she nodded and watched the pair ride out fast. Then with teeth set against the jolting pain that came from the deep gash in her scalp, she rode slowly down the trail toward home. . . .

THE two men meanwhile raced side by side down a long slope, following the broad trail of the cattle. It was an easy trail to follow, plowed by the cattle through the snow. The drivers were leading off toward the old Fort Road which hugged the mountain, and dropped finally into a canyon wilderness which was a favorite rustler hole-out. Reaching the road itself, the two riders thundered down it, with the silvery plain dim to one side, far below. The little Mexican swayed in the saddle as he rode, holding to the flat horn, keeping up a flow of curses to offset the gnawing pain of his arm.

Then, without warning from the swirling snow ahead sounded a loud fusillade of shots.

The rustlers were upon them.

Chone's horse tumbled, throwing the little Mexican far to the side of the road. Vance drew up his mount and dragged his rifle from leather. Up ahead came the voice of a man, familiar to Vance, but not enough to identify it.

"Let's finish 'em up, damn 'em!" the rider shouted, and the three horsemen thundered up the road.

Vance and one of the on coming riders fired simultaneously. Vance's horse went down, but Vance swung clear of him, and fired again.

His brain worked lightning fast, and he flung himself behind the barricade of the dead horse, but it was not to cower and whimper; it was to fight.

Old Chone, lying prone along the side of the road, was firing with his one good arm. Vance's rifle, pumped another shot over the saddle of his dead horse, and a rider toppled out of the saddle. Their yells stopped and the other two swerved out of the road and into cover. From there the pair carried on the battle.

Then from the brush at the side a rider came full tilt toward Vance, emptying a six-shooter. Vance rose to meet him and ran straight toward the lead-spewing gun.

As the man's mount leaped a ditch and recovered his balance, Vance flung himself at the man in the saddle and straight at the small black hole of the gun barrel.

No flame spurted from it; the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. Vance shouted, and his hands gripped the rider's arm as the fellow's empty gun hammered down at him. Yanking the big rider from the saddle, Vance tripped him up and both fell to the ground. They rolled to the side of the road under the deep shadow of a juniper whose branches showered them with snow as they fought.

The big rider was still lashing out with that gun barrel. It scraped along Vance's head with enough force to partially stun him, but as it lifted again Vance caught the wrist of the hand holding the weapon. The man's grip was like steel, and dazedly returning to fang and claw days, Vance sank his teeth in the hand. The weapon dropped to the ground, and both men groped for it. Vance's hand blindly fumbling in the snow, found the barrel and lifted it to bring it down hard.

Through a fog of darkness and whirling senses, he kept raising his arm and bringing it down to realize finally that he was feebly battering a face half buried in the snow. The owner was completely out.

Without looking at him, Vance staggered back to Chone. The cattle, he noticed, had scattered below. The third rider had fled. The body of the other rustler still lay in the white road.

CHONE was flat on his back. His empty rifle lay by his side while he stared fixedly at a little hill where a gaunt dead pine stood extending one great limb over a thicket.

Vance rolled a cigarette for Chone, stuck it in his mouth, lighted it.

"What you do now?" he asked Vance.

"Catch a horse; round up those steers."

"Thees is one hell of cow drive," Chone remarked. "W'at for you take cattle?"

"For a thousand dollars," said Vance.

"Ah, the thousan' dollar!" exclaimed Chone. "That ees all arrange' for. I geev your mother for Tom. Chone Villa he mak' the return—he pay debt. Ees that why you drive thees cows? *Por Dios!*"

"See!" Chone went on weakly. "The pine tree weeth the limb? Ees like tree where a man weeth a rope on his neck go 'tick-tock, tick-tock' in the wind. Chone Villa, me, I am one dam' bad hombre. You forget thos' cows. Too dam' good family steal cows.

"Once I work for a man over the mountain," Chone went on dreamily. "You know heem—my boss. Wan day we ride to thees side of mountain. We run on man. The boss get drop, take his gun, tie heem up.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) of The Pecos Kid Western, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Recreational Reading, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1950. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York, Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600, Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County, Commission Expires March 30, 1952. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 2-49.

Then the boss man geev me plenty wheesky to drink and I theenk w'at hell one dam' fine boss. Then he say, 'We catch thees man who steal my cattle, savvy?'

" 'But you hav' no cattle thees side mountain,' I tell the boss. 'Thees man no thief.' But the boss man only laugh. 'No, we catch heem steal my cattle,' he said. 'Hav' drink. I theenk better we hang him.'

" 'Why not?' I say. It was the wheesky I drink w'at talk. 'Why not?' I say. So the boss man make wan noose on lariat and throw the other end over limb. Then we haul heem up high in air—and tie heem.

"Then we ride away. The wind she blow and the man she swing. 'Tick-tock,' say thees boss, and laugh. And w'en we are back at the ranch, he say, 'Chone, I theenk you better go away. A good horse, a hundred pesos. You go back Chihuahua, eh?' So I go."

"This man you hanged?" Vance said, puzzled. "Who was he? No man has been hanged in this part of the mountains."

"I tell you," said Chone, "in wan second. I go away, I stay six-eight years. Then I come back—I theenk I get job up here. In town I see thees boss man again. He say notheeng—just frown. An' w'en I ride from town he and a cowboy ride, too—to shoot me. Then thees Tom brother ride out to save me—theenk of that—after I hav' help hang his father w'en I was drunk!"

"This boss?" demanded Vance hoarsely. "You worked for Rock Logan in this country? The boss was Rock Logan?"

Chone nodded. "The package, you do not forget? Wan thousan' dollar—" He choked and blood appeared as a froth on his mouth.

"The boss man, she laugh, 'Tick-tock'," he muttered and lay still.

A full half-minute Vance Thurlew stood staring down at the dead man, while pictures rearranged themselves in his mind. He remembered the morning when Tom had told him of their mother's coming home late at night, saying that Charley had ridden away, that they would have to help.

"Rock Logan," he repeated. "Rock Logan." And he'd marry her and hand over a thousand dollars for Tom, would he?

He had forgotten the man in the shadow of the juniper, but now when he saw him stirring he went over and dragged him out into the moonlight and looked down at his face.

And staring up at him through a bloody face were the slant eyes of Rock Logan.

CHAPTER FIVE

Men of Courage

IT WAS not such a great coincidence. Rock Logan, with an eye open for opportunities, had known of those Box A cattle, had ridden to get them.

"Damn you, Rock!" Vance shouted, and drew back his boot to kick the man but changed his mind. "Get up!" he ordered curtly. "You're riding, Rock. Taking a long ride—the same kind Charley took," he muttered.

"Chone talked, did he?" said Rock. "What yuh aimin' to do? There's no proof in what a crazy Mexican said."

"Yo're ridin' to our ranch," said Vance.

"For what?" demanded Rock. "I'm tellin' yuh they ain't no proof. There was no complaint made at the time of death."

Then the rancher fell silent, realizing his words fell on deaf ears. They rode slowly along the trails, with the wind brushing up the snow, hurling it at their faces.

And finally below them in the canyon bottom, squatted the low bulk of the Thurlew cabin with its small panes yellowish from lamplight.

They dismounted. "Inside!" Vance ordered Rock Logan curtly, and untied the ropes about his wrists. Logan recovered his assurance and stepped brazenly inside.

Through the open door leading to the next room, he could see the aspen pole bed, with his brother lying on it. Tom's eyes were open; apparently he was conscious, enduring the pain without drug. Ellen

Grow sat on the edge of the bed, watching.

"What is this, Vance?" his mother demanded. She had not taken off the mackinaw, and she still wore the worn chaps. Ellen Grow had washed the blood which had clotted in her hair and had put a bandage about her head.

"What is it?" Mary Thurlew repeated, staring up at Vance's stern face, wondering at the change in him.

"I brought him here so I'd have witnesses," said Vance.

"Witnesses to what?" demanded Rock Logan harshly. "You can't put nothin' over on me. I admit nothing."

"There was a man hanged on the mountain eight years ago," said Vance. "Supposed to be for rustling. It was not rustling. He was hanged by an enemy."

Mary Thurlew sat up, staring wildly at Rock Logan. "You mean that Rock—"

Vance nodded. "Rock killed Charley. Chone Villa helped him. Charley wasn't stealing cattle; Rock figured to make it look like neighbors had lynched him. And all this time, Logan, you've been telling her that. So that you could marry her."

ROCK LOGAN flinched a little, not at Vance's accusation but at the look in the woman's eyes. "There is no proof," he blustered. "Tell your story to any court and they'd laugh. There's no evidence that Thurlew is even dead. His family said he had left the country."

"We don't need much proof in the session of court we're holding here tonight," said Vance. "It won't be necessary. You and I are going to step outside, Rock. You with a gun. I'll follow you—also with a gun."

"You can't believe Chone," insisted Logan suddenly shaky. "It's a wild yarn. Chone was crazy. He made all that up. Don't believe him, Mary."

"Don't speak to her!" growled Vance. "There's enough proof. One thing alone

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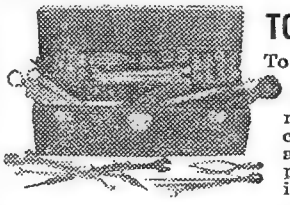

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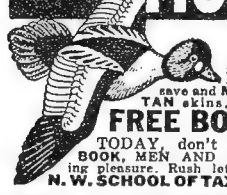

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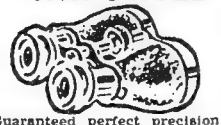

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that will tell if Chone was lying or not. It's in that package in your coat, Ma—the one Chone handed you. Chone said that he'd gotten a thousand dollars from Rock Logan to head back to Chihuahua. Open it."

She fumbled with trembling hands to bring out the newspaper-wrapped package. Inside the paper was a long envelope, and in it, held together by a rubber band, was a thick sheaf of bills, all of twenty-dollar denomination.

"And I suppose that Chone just picked that money out of a clear sky," went on Vance. "Rock, yo're convicted as the dirtiest polecat that ever polluted this country. Why did you give him the money?"

Logan wet his lips. "That's my business," he said.

"We're makin' it ours," said Thurlew.

Logan's hard, slate eyes shifted about the room, found no mercy. His gaze wandered to the bed in the other room where Tom Thurlew lay, watching him closely.

"Those cattle—I didn't steal them," went on Vance, "because it wasn't necessary. This money is to send Tom away. Chone gave it to us. And now, Rock, out you go and out I go. Outdoors, I'll toss you your gun and give you the chance you don't deserve. We ought to string you up."

The giant Logan gave one sudden bound, to reach the six-shooter which Mary Thurlew had laid on the table by her side. Snatching it up, he turned with a savage yell to face them, ready to kill anyone in his path, all of the people in the house if necessary.

In the other room Ellen Grow screamed. Vance faced Logan, caught off guard, without a gun in his hand, and none within easy reach.

Logan swung on him deliberately. "Damn yuh, take this!" he shouted. "I killed the he-wolf! Here goes for one of his whelps!"

In the other room there was a movement; the sick man raised an arm from the coverlet, and it held a six-shooter. There

came two explosions of guns in the close confines of the cabin, so loud they were, it seemed as if the walls had burst. One followed close on the other, but the second shot by Rock Logan was fired at the floor from a gun already dangling from his nerveless hand.

Logan's huge body turned, with the gray shadow of death on it, stared through the doorway into the other room where Tom Thurlew lay, holding the gun he had whispered to Ellen Grow to hand him a few moments before. From its barrel smoke lifted lazily. Still staring open-eyed at Tom, Logan fell, hitting the floor in a loose heap from which not even a quiver of movement came.

Vance dragged him outside. In the Hachitas little question would be raised over Rock Logan's passing; the word of Mary Thurlew would go with any coroner's jury.

Vance came in, stood looking at his mother and at Tom in his bed.

"That was quick work, Tom," he said quietly. "It saved me, but I wish it hadn't. I came back here with a yellow stripe down my back an' forkin' a panic. Maybe you two can forget it sometime, but I never can. If they come for me account that trouble up north, I'll go back to take my medicine, As long as they don't, I'll ride here—until Tom anyway is able to set a saddle again."

Tom grinned from the bed, called out feebly: "Forget it. Come here, Vance; shake hands with me. And that birthday cake, Mom; it's never been cut. We got to eat it tonight, for tomorrow I'll be going to town for that operation."

Mary Thurlew sat looking at her sons. It had been a weary time, those eight years since the night when the boots of a dangling man had swung in ghostly arcs, but Tom and Vance were worth all the pain and sacrifice. She again had two sons. If the one had been weak, the greater his honor that courage had returned to him.

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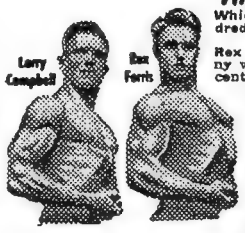

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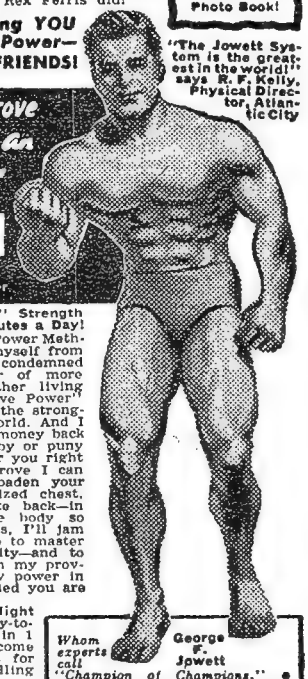

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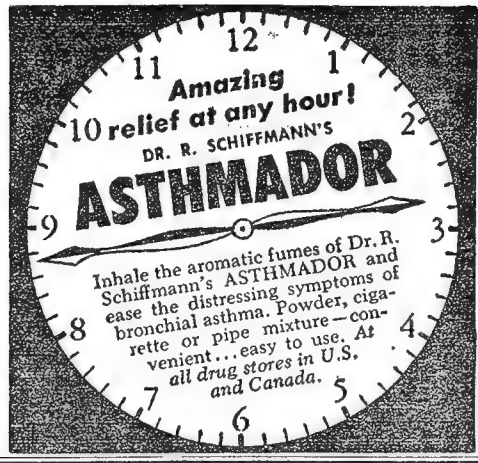
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(Continued from page 87)

Green's hound, which hung across the saddle.

IT TOOK a whole day to round up the stampeded cattle, for after the dog's barking, the shouts, the shooting, had all started them. thunder and lightning and then pounding rain finished the job of spreading the animals to kingdom come.

But the rustlers were of some use. After Charley's hands had cleared themselves of the breaking herd, they hunted the chuck wagon. On the way they picked up a pair of riders with no good reason for being around a stampeding herd.

Under an awning pegged out from the chuck wagon, Charley Green told them, "You boys was up to no good. But we'll forget it and feed yuh besides, if yuh'll help round up these cows." They agreed readily enough, and Pancho's cooking clinched the deal. Their leader and Karp and the other man had disappeared.

Pete and Charley worked together bandaging up the cut on Chihuahua's head. It was some days before the dog could leave the chuck wagon. But while they worked, Pete told the whole story.

"I figured I'd be damned if I'd let a flea-bit hound show more loyalty than I got," Pete grumbled, as they tied Chihuahua's bandages tight.

"But why'd he jump the hombre in the first place,"

Pete laughed. "Why, he saw the fellow strike a match, and he knew it'd spook the cows. Chihuahua's that smart."

"Reckon I never properly appreciated him," Charley said. "Mebbe we ought to feed him straight meat, 'stead of bones. Treat him like one of us."

Pete growled, "And next trip north you buy good beans, Boss. No worms! You damn ol' skinflint!"

"Okay," Charley said.

(Continued from page 77)

dig down. All at once, with a snarl of bitterness, he gave a sharp upward flip of a forepaw. A trap leaped, its jaws snapping with metallic ring. Tarat cringed back, but chortled thickly in the ecstasy of another conquest.

Slowly, surely, he shuffled in until his nose touched the carcass of his kill. He flicked frosted meat with his tongue, and whimpered softly as he tasted sweet flavorful anise oil with which the man creature had touched the carcass.

Now, those great jaws clamped on a hold, and Tarat back-tracked, heaving and tugging.

He slid over the lower pole of the aperture, took a new grip on the stiff carcass; braced himself and heaved. The caribou remains gave.

Tarat snarled, growled deep in his throat as his muscles grew taut. Now he braced his rear paws against a lower pole and writhed, weaved, pulled steadily, and the small fawn's carcass dropped with a thud outside the trap. But Tarat did not cease his tireless work until he had dragged his reclaimed kill deep into the scrub grove.

Now, at last, he subsided, blowing sharply. He snatched up a mouthful of snow and chewed it. Melted, it dripped from his jaws stained with his blood.

The deceptive false dawn light was startling at first, but Tarat grunted and rose to set his fangs to work on hide and flesh. He was now dissecting his kill into chunks light enough to be carried to his hideout.

The moon was suddenly overcast. A light skiff of snow began to peck at his eyes and muzzle. A sudden weather change had come, but Tarat was not disturbed. It was as though he sensed that a snowfall would work in his favor.

THREE trips he made to his bedground. The snow was falling in heavy flakes now, as Tarat approached the remnants of

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the carcass. Suddenly, he checked himself, snarling. Ahead, two sets of eyes glowed through the falling snow.

A pair of adult wolves were in.

Tarat, the glutton, clacked his jaws as he worked himself into a fever pitch of anger, of hatred.

He snarled, and the wolves spun from their feeding. The male wolf, a huge, almost black timber wolf, bounded forward. Tarat coiled, swung inside and raked the attacker with a set of foreclaws that tore a large section of skin from the side of the big wolf's face.

The she-wolf, a gaunt, lean, silver gray, whipped in to attack from the rear, but now the usually slow-moving wolverine whipped and struck with a speed that completely belied his squat shape. Strong jaws snapped. They found a target as the she-wolf attempted to whip to one side.

Tarat gave out hideous throat sounds as he pressed forward, using his strong leg muscles to give him purchase. He relinquished his fang hold on fur and skin, then like lightning thrust forward. His powerful jaws were closing on flesh, sinking deeply into the she-wolf's neck, when the big black male wolf leaped.

Tarat gave a sharp wrench to his neck as fang points struck his back. He ripped his almost locked fangs clear of the she-wolf's neck, then with all his power lashed out with three sets of terrible claws.

The male wolf sprang back, his underparts dripping profusely. Hungry, starving, for the main caribou herd had sheered off their hunting grounds, the wolf pair had gambled and had lost.

The she wolf crept slowly into the cover of the thicket, and the male backed off, his hackles up, his torn face a horrible mask as Tarat, belly-down, his own face grimacing, snarled further challenges, ready in an instant to hurl himself into violent battle.

A sudden crunching of snow sent the

male wolf bounding off. Tarat swung, lifted his head and weaved as he sniffed sharply. His lips peeled back over his bloodied teeth as he caught the man scent.

Slowly, he circled the skeleton remnants of the fawn kill, and almost instantly, the air was befouled as he sprayed the zone, including the remains of the carcass.

DALY'S eyes blinked as he moved in on his well-planned pole trap and dug with a snowshoe at the break-in, where he had so wisely set an outside trap. His brows elevated sharply. The trap was gone!

Daly searched for tracks, and found the trail of the dragged carcass without much difficulty. Swearing bitterly he moved along it, then suddenly recoiled. The stench was over-powering. Coughing, he backed off, but he had seen the few skeleton remains.

Daly shivered. He wore an old inadequate mackinaw coat over his sweater. Miserably, he glared into the brush at the work of Tarat, then slowly turned and shrugged. His eyes narrowed and his jaws tightened as he approached the trap. Then he flung his arms wide in acceptance of defeat.

" 'Tain't no dang use!" he acknowledged. "Dang hellion is likely ten mile away by this time, enjoyin' a real feast—a mockery feast."

Within an hour, his belly well filled, Tarat laved his wounded paw a while, then belching vulgarly, he coiled himself. His eyes began to dull and his eyelids closed. At peace with himself, grunting in the luxury of complete contentment, the contentment that comes with great victory, Tarat slipped into sleep, a sleep that was unbroken as the soft white mantle of snow fell to mute all sounds in the grim and desolate swamp so well suited as a bedground for the buccaneer hellion of the north wilds.

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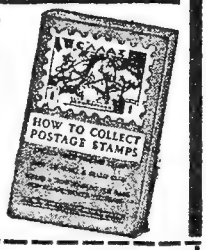

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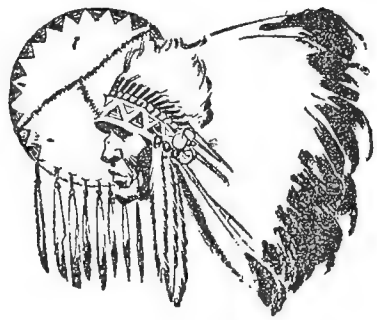
(Continued from page 79)

tribe to tribe, but among the Sioux the next step would be the initiation. The medicine man and other members of the Cult would tell the tenderfoot all the rituals he was to perform the rest of his life, and the things that made his luck good or



bad. The medicine man would get up a bundle that contained all the brave's "medicine"—gear havin' to do with his guardian spirit. If the spirit was a deer, for instance, it might have a deer tooth necklace, deer antlers and hooves, sage (which was deer food), and so on. 'Cordin' to their beliefs, these was to protect him from harm and make him powerful in battle. So if any Indian was real successful in huntin' and fightin' they said his "medicine was good." Which same was a phrase the white man took to in his lingo.

The Blackfoot was real keen on this idea of medicine bundles. They had a system where bundles could be transferred like money. In fact, so strong was this idea that some bundles—no doubt belongin' to some of the stronger spirits—was worth several thousand dollar's worth of property.

But some tribes worked things a little different, not carin' for individual bundles. Some, like the Pawnee along the Platte River had just one bundle for the whole shebang. When the villages pow-wowed

or went on the warpath, they'd all bring their bundles and use 'em in their ceremonies.

And the Pawnee was one outfit as needed strong medicine, 'cause Manabus and their guardian spirits was about the only friends they had. They was continually fightin' with every tribe around.

Just to show how old the idea of sacred bundles is—there's a real book-learned fellow name of Clark Wissler who tells of an ancient Aztec legend that mentions two sacred bundles handed down from the gods. The idea is pretty doggone old, 'cause the Aztecs was a thrivin' people way before the Egyptians ever built their Pyramids.

This fellow Wissler says: ". . . the ritualistic bundle is an old and fundamental development in North American culture . . . based upon the much less specialized and more widely distributed concept of the individual guardian . . . such a (guardian) spirit is one of the most fundamental traits in the culture of the Indian."

Another part of the Indian's religion had to do with buff'lo—that is the ones that depended on buff'lo for their livin'. It was pretty mysterious to the Indian, the way the buff'lo would meander around from summer to winter grazin' and back again. The only way he could see it was that a Grand Buffalo ruled all the herds. No buff'lo was ever killed without first askin' the Grand Buff'lo's permission, and once makin' the kill, no part of the animal was wasted. From teeth to tail, the Indian had a use for everything.

The whiteman, in takin' over the Indian nations, learned quite a lot from the Redman. He picked up new words, new ways of doin' things, how to read sign and cure a cold with a sweat bath, for instance, but there's one thing the Indians taught the whiteman ain't learned yet. And that, pardner, is brotherhood!

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TEXAS BRANDS

By NELL MURBARGER

FIFTY years before the rest of the Southwest was removed from Mexican rule, the broad grasslands of Texas were already attracting American settlers. Many of these remained to become the nation's first storied cattle kings.

When James Taylor White located in what is now Liberty county and established there the Crossed W brand, there were but 22 states in the Union and James Madison was their president. That was 128 years ago, but today finds the Crossed W still being burned on Liberty county cattle by fifth generation descendants of its founder.

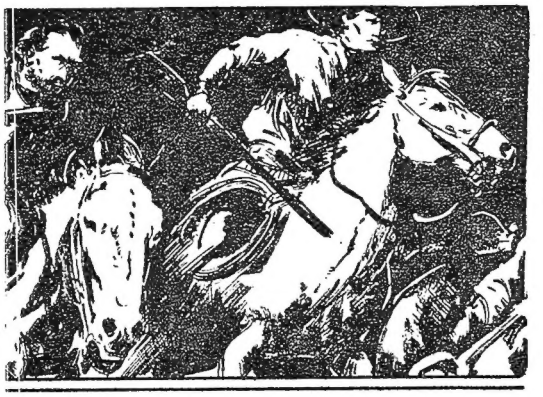
For the past 111 years, the MC brand has appeared on McFaddin cattle. The O brand of the Pierce estate at Pierce, Texas, began its second century last year. The 06, run by H. L. Kokernot of San Antonio, has been in constant use for 100 years. TV cattle have been branded by the Wrights of Alice, Texas, for 95 years, and the KC brand, of Toyah, has been used by a father-son lineage of Caseys for an equal time. Scores of brands have been in use by the same Lone Star families for three-fourths of a century and more.

Under Texas' law the same brand may be employed by different owners in each of the state's 254 counties and it is estimated that more than a million brands have been registered in that state, alone.

(Continued from page 70)

those homesteaders. Close the mill, pay the damage. And I'll settle the score with those rustlers at Bull Sink, too. You boys stay and help me. I don't know how much he offered to pay you, but I'll raise it."

"Sorry, Al. We got pretty important business elsewhere." Pecos laid a hand on his arm. "Some *very important* things to take care of in the territory of Idaho."



At dawn they left the Citadel behind. To the south, rising straight and high against the morning horizon, was a pillar of smoke marking the position of the King Midas mill.

Hernandez, pointing it out, said, "There is one task taken care of already."

"Yeah. Those homesteaders meant business." Pecos kept tossing the bag of gold pieces from one hand to another. "We got to leave this yonder with Mis' Rutledge. From there, I reckon, we'll head south through Threesleep to the N.P. How much money you got sewed in your drawers, Jim? Maybe we could load these broncs in a stock car and ride 'em in style across the mountains to that silver town in Idaho. Always hankered to see Idaho. Butch, what was it about that place? Was it a six story building filled to the roof with women?"

"Well, perhaps it is only *three* stories filled weeth women. What the hell? Cannot we make love to all of them twice?"

THE END

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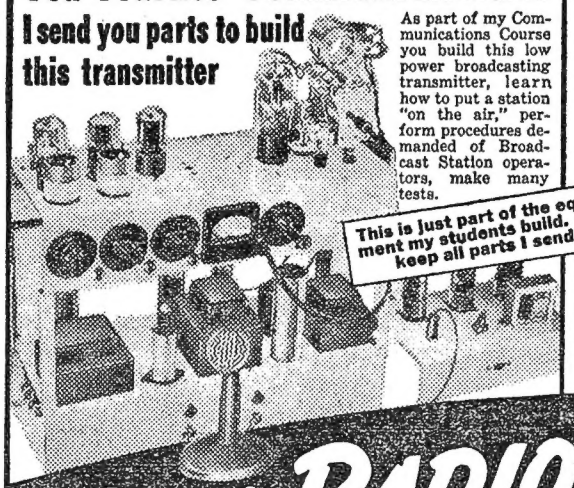

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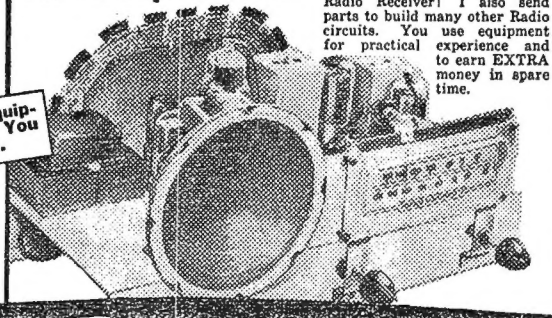

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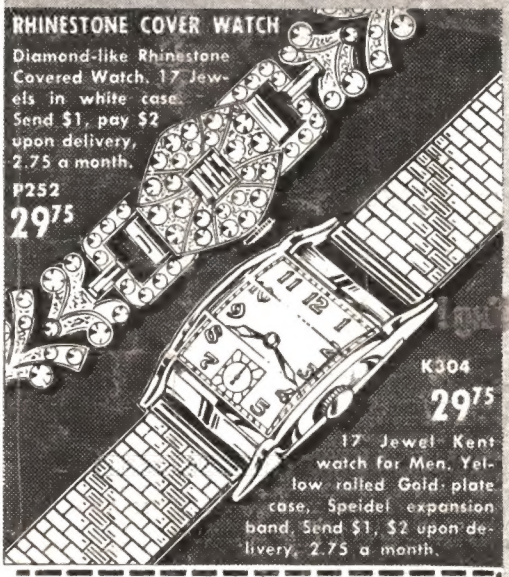

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